

# The Philosopher and the Literary Critic: Eric Voegelin and Northrop Frye

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My presentation is an introduction to the doctoral dissertation I am writing at the University of Montreal in which I am combining Voegelin's "theory of consciousness" and Northrop Frye's "mythological universe" in order to analyze a corpus of about thirty Quebecois and American poems. In the past, critics have attempted to combine Voegelin's insights with those of a complementary literary theorist. Marion Montgomery's *Why Flannery O'Conner Stayed Home*, for example, the opening volume of his magisterial trilogy of the early 1980s "The Prophetic Poet and the Spirit of the Age," juxtaposes Montgomery's understanding of Voegelin's philosophy with a critical approach based for the most part on Jacques Maritain's neothomist classic *Art and Scholasticism*, published in Paris in 1920.

Montgomery became, in Michael Federici's phrase, one of "Voegelin's Christian critics," who, after they had assimilated *The Ecumenic Age*, decided that the philosopher was in fact not their man, that he was insufficiently Christian and too Platonist. Between 1997 and the year 2000, Montgomery published a second trilogy, "Poets and Philosophers, Priests and Politicians." Montgomery writes in this trilogy that Voegelin's weakness is that he has "difficulty in coming to terms with the reality of grace."<sup>1</sup> [1] And so this early attempt to juxtapose Voegelin's philosophy with a compatible literary theory, in this case Maritain's "Creative Intuition," did not prove to be an enduring critical approach in the work of Montgomery, an American Catholic conservative.

By placing Voegelin's philosophy in the sphere of Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism, I am of course pulling Voegelin out of the context of neothomism and Catholic philosophy in

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<sup>1</sup> [1] Marion Montgomery, *Concerning Intellectual Philandering* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998) 17.

general and positioning him in a different philosophic-aesthetic tradition: that of Milton, Blake and Frye, of radical Protestantism. Voegelin in the *History of Political Ideas* memorably called Milton a "totalitarian National Scripturalist." And in the 1970 postscript to his letter on *The Turn of the Screw*, Voegelin identified Milton's "construction" in *Paradises Lost* and *Regained* as the precursor to the "immanentist apocalypses" of Hegel, Comte, and Marx and considered Milton's conception of man's "inward oracle" to be a first formulation of Sartre's existentialist *moi*, condemned to freedom.

Blake, an altogether more lovable poet than Milton, receives kinder treatment from Voegelin in the same essay but does not escape criticism. Voegelin liked Blake's observation in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that *Paradise Lost* reduces the Holy Ghost to a Vacuum. Blake, he says, "was free to fill the vacuum with his visions," but the social activist fills it with revolutionary violence.<sup>2</sup> [2] As for Frye, in an article in the book *Politics, Order and History*, "Eric Voegelin and Literary Theory," Professor Eugene Webb writes that, along with Robert Heilman and Cleanth Brooks, Northrop Frye was a literary critic that Voegelin "admired."<sup>3</sup> [3]

Blake called Milton his "original," and Blake is Frye's original. The English Canadian critic's 1947 *Fearful Symmetry* is still arguably the most profound study of the author of *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, Blake's two masterpieces. In that book Frye states that Milton is nearest to Blake in the *Areopagitica*, which

was undoubtedly a major influence in forming Blake's doctrine that the Christian Church cannot exist outside the arts because the secondary Word of God which unites us to the primary Word or Person of Christ is a book and not a ceremony.<sup>4</sup> [4]

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2 [2] Eric Voegelin, On Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*," *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 12 (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1990) 157.

3 [3] Eugene Webb, " Eric Voegelin and Literary Theory," *Politics, Order and History*, eds. Glenn Hughes, Stephen A. McKnight and Geoffrey L. Price (Sheffield: Sheffield UP, 2001) 504

4 [4] Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947) 159.

As Protestants, Milton, Blake and Frye think in these biblical terms. It is hard for me to know how much of Frye's work Voegelin had read or how deep his knowledge of Frye was. My guess is that "passing acquaintance" would be the phrase most accurate to describe Voegelin's knowledge of Frye, because it is hard to reconcile his criticism of Milton with his admiration for one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century most important Miltonians.

How does my study reconcile this contradiction? I follow Professors Hughes and Lawrence's criticism in their article "The Challenge of Eric Voegelin" where they write that Voegelin's

criticism of what he finds philosophically reprehensible is often so permeated with scorn and condemnation that, unalleviated by reminders that the thinker under discussion has some important insights to offer as well, such passages can seem superficial and unfair.<sup>5</sup> [5]

I argue that while Voegelin had an important insight into the limitations of Milton's argument in favor of free publication, that insight does not constitute a particularly deep understanding of the complexity of Milton's thought. Or as Robert Watson writes in his essay on "Milton's Chaos" in *Politics, Order and History*, "the picture Voegelin draws of the poet lacks dimension."<sup>6</sup> [6] And Watson's article is a good attempt to rescue Milton from Voegelin's scorn. I think it's fair to say that Voegelin was unfair to Milton, and that Milton's legacy is much more complicated, in its positive and negative aspects, than Voegelin's scattered references to him might lead an inexperienced reader to believe. That is to say, I believe that Voegelin's dismissal of Milton does not constitute an impediment to the use of his theory of consciousness

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5 [5] Glenn Hughes & Frederick Lawrence, "The Challenge of Eric Voegelin", *The Political Science Reviewer* 24 (1995): 440.

6 [6] Robert A. Watson, "Milton's Chaos and the Experience of the *Apeiron*," *Politics, Order and History, Essays on the Work of Eric Voegelin*, eds. Glenn Hughes, Stephen A. McKnight and Geoffrey L. Price (Sheffield: Sheffield UP, 2001).

as a complement to a literary theory which has a foundation that is biblical, Protestant and Miltonian.

The desire to use Voegelin's philosophy in literary criticism has an almost forty-year old history. Its examples can be divided into two categories: articles that discuss Voegelin's analysis of the Greek tragedians and James' *The Turn of the Screw* usually at the same time advocating his relevance to literary criticism and, second, those that analyze a text or the body of work of one author in a Voegelinian perspective. An early example of the first category is a 1966 article in *Drama Survey*, in which Anselm Atkins used Voegelin's analysis of Aeschylus in *The World of the Polis* to explain the decline of tragedy in modern theater and concluded by suggesting: "It would be interesting now to see a confrontation between Voegelin's diagnosis and those of professional critics like Preston Roberts, Northrop Frye, George Steiner."7 [7] The second category includes presentations at Voegelin Society meetings on Henrik Ibsen, Fernando Pessoa, Robert Penn Warren and Professor Hughes' article on Ezra Pound and the balance of consciousness. The most substantial collection to date of both categories are the four articles that conclude *Politics, Order and History* in the section entitled "Voegelin's 'Implicit' Theory of Literary and Modern Cultural Criticism." Professor Webb's already mentioned contribution to this section fits into the first category and concludes with a comparison of Voegelin and the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin.

Voegelin and Frye? Is Voegelin really more compatible with him than he might be with another literary theorist? Bakhtin, for example. Professor Webb notes that Voegelin and Bakhtin share a common refusal to close history, but more importantly a common stress on what Bakhtin called the dialogic imagination, superior in his view to the monologic imagination, and

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7 [7] Anselm Atkins, "Eric Voegelin and the Decline of Tragedy," *Drama Survey* 5.3 (Winter 1966-1967): 285.

which Professor Webb ties to Voegelin's Question.8 [8] Bakhtin's conception of the superiority of the dialogic imagination led him to praise the novel, and to put poetry, particularly lyric poetry, in a secondary position. A student in the future writing on the novel might want to put together Voegelin and Bakhtin but my interest is poetry and for that Frye is much more appropriate. Similarly, James Babin, whose study of Melville has been enriched by his reading of Voegelin, argues for the importance to literary criticism of Voegelin's stress on the story in the first half of *In Search of Order*.9 [9]

What brings Voegelin and Frye together in my dissertation is not a question of shared sensibility or an understanding of the importance of the "story of the quest"10 [10] in consciousness. What brings them together is a shared understanding that consciousness is formed by symbols and analogies.

Frye's central interest is, in a phrase he used as the title of the first half of *The Great Code*, "the order of words,"11 [11] which I would like to suggest is for verbal culture, oral and written, the equivalent to a phrase Voegelin often used, "the order of being." For Frye, since Homer, language has developed through magical, hieratic, and demotic phases, and each phase has an order of words he describes as metaphoric, metonymic and descriptive: the gods, God, and in the present demotic phase the word "'God' becomes linguistically unfunctional, except when confined to special areas."12 [12] For Voegelin, the order of being is essentially unknowable, but man attempts to know it through the creation of symbols which interpret the

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8 [8] Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin and Literary Theory* 514.

9 [9] James Babin, "Voegelin and the Study of Literature," *Politics, Order and History, Essays on the Work of Eric Voegelin*, eds. Glenn Hughes, Stephen A. McKnight and Geoffrey L. Price (Sheffield: Sheffield UP, 2001) 579.

10 [10] Voegelin, *In Search of Order* 27.

11 [11] Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: HBJ, 1981) 1-101.

12 [12] Northrop Frye, *Great Code* 15.

unknown by analogy with the really, or supposedly, known, and these symbols slowly become more adequate.<sup>13</sup> [13]

I argue that the passage between Frye's first two language phases, from the magical to the hieratic, is the equivalent in the order of words to the passage from cosmologic myth to differentiated consciousness in Voegelin's stages of the order of being. For Frye, analogy is most important in the metaphoric second phase of language with its development of continuous prose. In a sentence that puts Voegelin's philosophic "symbol" in literary terms, Frye writes that analogy often takes a form that "smooths out the discrepancies in a metaphorical structure [that is, cosmologic myth] by making it conform to a conceptual standard [that is, differentiated consciousness]."<sup>14</sup> [14]

For Frye, all human words are a part of the Word; and for Voegelin the consciousnesses of all human beings are a part of Being. The order of words and the order of being? What is their relation? What are their differences? Do they have similar laws? How do these two orders create symbols in consciousness? What is the relation between the symbols they create? How to bring these two orders and their symbols together coherently in a critical approach in literary studies.

My answer to the last question is vocabulary. The starting point of my project was the development of a Frye-Voegelin glossary. Glossaries have been popular in books about Voegelin; they have not been popular in studies of Frye. The development of this glossary has shown that some of Frye and Voegelin's symbols contradict, others run parallel, and a third group overlap and fuse, though never in perfect synchronicity. This last set has been the most

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<sup>13</sup> [13] Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation* 5.

<sup>14</sup> [14] Northrop Frye, *Great Code* 10.

helpful in the analysis of specific poems, and the symbol "imagination," furnishes a good example of it.

For Frye, imagination is man's life as an acting and perceiving being. For Voegelin, imagination is also an act: man's movement from participation to expression. But the imagination can derail when it falls into egophanic revolt, driven by what Frye calls the Will and Voegelin similarly calls the *libido dominandi*. On the other hand, the manifestation of "imaginative perversion" is different, even opposed, in Frye and Voegelin: for Frye, imaginative perversion manifests in passivity; for Voegelin, it manifests in passion.

Frye's theory of the imagination, laid out in *Fearful Symmetry*, is founded on the terms Blake devised to portray consciousness. The Blake-Frye imagination has three levels with the third level divided into two parts. It is the basis for the mythological universe that Frye formulated in the books he wrote from 1970 to his death in 1991. In Voegelinian terms, the imagination as conceived by Frye belongs to the complex "consciousness-reality-language." Its lowest level, Ulro, is isolated consciousness reflecting on its memories of perception, evolving abstract ideas. Above it is the world of organism and environment, of subject and object that we live in. No living thing is completely adjusted to this world except plants, hence Blake speaks of it as vegetable and calls it Generation. The visionary capacity of imagination appears in the third level, Beulah, a term from Isaiah which means married. Beulah is a state of childlike wonder where one feels capable of possessing the entire universe. Its symbol is sexual love, which symbolically obliterates the subject/object division of Generation. Wonder and love create imaginative receptivity. They are the basis for Eden, the highest level of the imagination, the union of creator and creature, the poet and painter's union of energy and form. Ironically, Beulah could be symbolized by the garden of the Bible's first book, while the Frye-Blake Eden is the

fiery city of creation illuminated by the spiritual sun of its last.<sup>15</sup> [15] In Voegelinien terms, Frye's highest imaginative level is the meeting place of intentionality and luminosity.

Voegelin's definition of imagination in *In Search of Order* starts from the human search for meaning and the event that occurs when reality responds to human questioning: "The event, we may say, is imaginative in the sense that man can find the way from his participatory experience of reality to its expression through symbols <sup>16</sup> [16] ". Imagination is a structure of reality, and imaginative truth belongs both to bodily human consciousness and to reality as it comprehends man as a partner in the community of being.

In the Frye-Voegelin glossary, imagination is defined as the place where reality, in both its Thing- and It- aspects, enters the Beulah-Eden state in order to create symbols to advance the complex "consciousness-reality-language." For both Voegelin and Frye, imagination is as much present in the philosopher's "reality," which I treat as a synonym to the literary critic's "universe," as in consciousness. Imagination finds its linguistic symbols, philosophic or poetic, in the moment the reality-universe uses consciousness to articulate its truths. Frye's and Voegelin's imaginations can be fused because the philosopher and the literary critic would both agree with the statement: We have an imagination because the imagination of the reality-universe has us.

But Frye and Voegelin also differ in their understanding of imaginative derailment, and on other subjects. Behind the meeting of Voegelin and Frye is another meeting, that of their originals, Plato and Blake. Emerson in *Representative Men* (1850) called Plato "the Philosopher" and Shakespeare "the Poet." But a case can be made that in the 154 years since Emerson's book, Blake has replaced Shakespeare, more truly "the Playwright," as the English-

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<sup>15</sup> [15] Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* 48-50.

<sup>16</sup> [16] Voegelin, *In Search of Order* 37.



language's "Poet." The representative philosopher and poet meet for the most part on a field of disagreements. To Plato, whose Muses were the daughters of Memory, knowledge was recollection and art imitation: to Blake, both knowledge and art are recreation.<sup>17</sup> [17] Plato's ban on poets in *The Republic* and Blake's contempt for classical culture influence Voegelin and Frye, for there is a mistrust of prophetic poetry in Voegelin and of Plato's opinions on poetry in Frye.

And on a third level, the meeting of the Voegelin-Plato spirit of philosophy and the Frye-Blake spirit of poetry is also an encounter between Mathew Arnold's old categories from his book *Culture and Anarchy* of "hellenism" and "hebraism." Voegelin worked consciously to bring together Greece and Israel in his articles and books, but as a philosopher his attention fell more on Greece. Frye was more biblical, his treatment of Plato more critical, indicating that he had picked up some of Blake's and Milton's prejudices against classical culture. Blake's *Milton* opens: "The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid, of Plato & Cicero, which all Men ought to contemn, are set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible."<sup>18</sup> [18] Milton in *Paradise Regained*: the arts of Greece "will be found unworthy to compare / With Sion's songs, to all true tastes excelling."<sup>19</sup> [19]

Voegelin began "Order and History" with a study of the Old Testament and then went off towards Greece and other points. Frye, on the other hand, spent his career moving toward the Bible and in his last two major books, *The Great Code* in 1981 and *Word With Power* in 1990, he left behind a masterful two-part study of Biblical structure and imagery, in the typological tradition.

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<sup>17</sup> [17] Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* 85.

<sup>18</sup> [18] William Blake, *Milton* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1978) 61.

<sup>19</sup> [19] John Milton, "Paradise Regained," *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998) 774.

Frye calls classical culture "cyclical" and Hebrew culture "evolutionary" and in *Fearful Symmetry* approvingly quotes Blake's most damning criticism: "it is the Classics! & not Goths nor Monks that Desolate Europe with Wars."<sup>20</sup> [20] Voegelin writes in the essay "What is History" that "The Philosopher is not a prophet."<sup>21</sup> [21] But for Frye the poet is a prophet. And the two orders, the "order of words" and the "order of being," prove to be two "orders of knowledge" which resist each other.

But the poetic spirit reads philosophy, and philosophers analyze Aeschylus and Henry James, the practitioners of poetry and philosophy being somehow aware that their particular order of knowledge lacks something that always renders partial its vision of consciousness and the reality-universe. However, no matter how profoundly philosophic a philosophic poet is he or she remain a poet; and no matter how poetic the symbols and their expression are in a philosopher's books, they remain a philosopher. Similarities exist in the representative patterns of Frye's mythological universe and Voegelin's consciousness, but no final synthesis of them is possible, only a restless borrowing that leads deeper into poetry or philosophy itself.

A poet can lose the balance of consciousness when the *metaxic* site of the poem's composition is taken as a place to find answers instead of as a place to articulate the mystery of tension in the In-Between. Ezra Pound lost that balance, but another American poet, who benefited from Pound's generosity and then went on in a way to become the anti-Pound, Robert Frost, has a better grasp of the fact that the poetic *metaxy* is at once a site in his consciousness and in the universe of the Word, and that the symbols that consciousness and that universe create together are, when artistically drawn, "a momentary stay against confusion."

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<sup>20</sup> [20] William Blake, "On Homer's Poetry," *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 270.

<sup>21</sup> [21] Eric Voegelin, "What is History?", *What is History and Other Late Unpublished Writings*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 28 (Baton Rouge : LSU Press, 1990) 50.

I want to conclude by doing a short Frye-Voegelin analysis of what Frost called a "tricky poem,"<sup>22</sup> [22] *The Road Not Taken*, and which Robert Pinsky, when he was poet laureate in the late 1990s, discovered was "Americans' favorite poem" in a research project of that name.<sup>23</sup> [23]

The "I" of *The Road Not Taken*, the Questioner, is both in his consciousness and in the universe. The Beyond, the *epekeina*, has just become visible to him, as he has just left Ulro and entered the dualism of organism, his own, and the environment, "the yellow wood" of the poem, the woods almost always being the symbol of mystery in Frost. Before the Questioner lies two imaginative levels, the lower level of blissful union with the universe and the higher level of artistic union where energy, form, existence and perception are the same thing, where the "truly divine reality" of the Beyond can manifest itself. He chooses the Edenic Beyond and "that has made all the difference."

"I shall be telling this with a sigh," Frost writes. The "sigh" indicates that the Questioner has reached the soul-ordering Beyond and that his creator, unlike Pound, accepts in the humility of a sigh the "permanent imperfection of finite existence."<sup>24</sup> [24]

*The Road Not Taken* is an ironic commentary to Matthew 7.13, Jesus' parable of the choice between the wide gate that leads to the road of destruction versus the narrow gate that leads to life. Frost, sensitive to the mystery of how the "way," the tao, "leads on to way," the Beyond, shows that at the moment of decision the roads look "really about the same," and that

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<sup>22</sup> [22] Cited in : John Savoie, "A Poet's Quarrel: Jamesian Pragmatism and Frost's 'The Road Not Taken,'" *The New England Quarterly* 77.1 (March 2004): 7-8.

<sup>23</sup> [23] Robert Pinsky and Maggie Dietz, *Americans' Favorite Poems* (New York: Norton, 2000).

<sup>24</sup>[24] Glenn Hughes, "Ezra Pound and the Balance of Consciousness," *Transcendence and History* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003) 130

grace as much as reflective consciousness decide the Questioner's fate. The goal of this analysis has been not to use but to naturalize Voegelin's vocabulary in literary criticism.

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Voegelin, Eric, 1901-1985 -- Criticism and interpretation, Literature -- Philosophy, Literature -- History and criticism -- Theory, etc, Literature, Modern -- 20th century -- History and criticism. Publisher. Columbia : University of Missouri Press. Collection. inlibrary; printdisabled; universitypressofmissouri; americana. Digitizing sponsor. The Arcadia Fund. Eric Voegelin (born Erich Hermann Wilhelm Voegelin, German: [ÉˆfÁ,ÉgÉ™liÉn]; 1901â€“1985) was a German-American political philosopher. He was born in Cologne, and educated in political science at the University of Vienna where he became an associate professor of political science in its law faculty. In 1938 he and his wife fled from the Nazi forces which had entered Vienna. They emigrated to the United States, where they became citizens in 1944. He spent most of his academic career at Louisiana State University. Eric Voegelin's literary criticism in the Heilman-Voegelin Correspondence. Copyright 2004 Charles R. Embry. On December 19, 1955, Voegelin wrote Heilman: Your letter of Dec. 11th came just in time this morning, for I wanted to write you.Â 9 [9] Eric Voegelin, "Autobiographical Statement at Age 82," in *The Beginning and the Beyond: Papers from the Gadamer and Voegelin Conferences, Supplementary Issue of Lonergan Workshop, Volume 4*, ed. Fred Lawrence (Chico, California: Scholars Press, Boston College, 1984), 113.Â At this point, Voegelin maintained that the work of the literary critic is simply an analytical, rational continuation of the poet's work along the tracks laid out in the work of art itself. Part I The Philosopher 1 â€œOne of My Permanent Occupationsâ€: Eric Voegelin as Literary Critic. 13. 2 â€œThe Attunement of the Soulâ€: Eric Voegelinâ€™s Search of Order.Â That Voegelinâ€™s philosophy shares an essential link with literature and art underlies the justification for a work of literary criticism that focuses upon the nature of literature, its philosophical import, and the crucial importance of literature in helping address the crises of modern political, social, and spiritual disorder.1 Modern literature can best be understood within the larger context of philosophy: as. Eric Voegelin considered literary criticism one of his permanent occupations because of the necessity that confronted him as he worked toward the preparation of what he intended as his first major work in English â€” *The History of Political Ideas*.Â For a literary critic to be first and foremost a philosopher would appear to be a formidable qualification, but in returning to the Platonic understanding of that term â€” as Voegelin did â€” we find that a philosopher need only be a lover of wisdom. This is a very important understanding of the term philosopher, because it places the accent on lover without forcing a definition of wisdom.Â Like the writer, the reader and the critic must rely on consciousness as the site in which the imaginative act of criticism occurs.