

Tensional Language: The Priestly and the Prophetic

Charles W. Burchfield

We live in a time dominated by words: the printed word in the form of books, magazines, and newspapers; the spoken word brought to us by radio and television. From the morning newspaper to the commentator on evening TV, from the first-grade primer (or basal reader, to use the ugly contemporary description) to the latest work of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., or John Kenneth Galbraith, we are subjected to a constant flood of words, not of the *word*, which, as the embodiment of truth and the primal order of being was *In the beginning*, but of words; words intended to implant opinions, to make us do or believe something we would not have done or believed otherwise. It is this fact of words which characterizes our time, which differentiates it from all others, and which has made those who, in one way or another, control the dissemination of words the real rulers of our society.¹

THE ABOVE QUOTATION comes from Henry Regnery's *A Few Reasonable Words*. Given the truth of his assertion, that those who control the dissemination of words are the real rulers of our society, what can well-intentioned educators do in the classroom to help ensure that our free and democratic society continues? Some first steps might be the consultation of

the linguistic and epistemological theories of Eric Voegelin.

Symbolizations and mythologies, and their roles in shaping man's understanding of the order within man, society, the world, and philosophy and religion, are recurring topics of investigation throughout the study of order and history in Voegelin's works. Indeed, Voegelin's differentiation between pragmatic and paradigmatic histories is dependent upon how the various symbols and myths are to be interpreted, which is of the utmost concern and importance when considering the fact that Voegelin is attempting to discern meaning in history rather than merely tracing the sterile records of isolated historical facts through time. Disputes over the meaning of history and the proper interpretations of historical symbols and myths occurred not only in Voegelin's time, but also within the given cultures and times in which they were created and sustained. When the lines are drawn in historical battles over how properly to interpret the symbols and myths of history, what emerges is a fight over the elasticity of these symbols and myths, which exhibits itself in the polar movements of the priestly and the prophetic traditions.² These polarities of existential symbolism are illustrated clearly in Voegelin's analysis of the Hebraic tradition in *Israel and Revelation*

CHARLES W. BURCHFIELD teaches political science at Gainesville College in Gainesville, Georgia.

and in his analysis of the Hellenic tradition in both *The World of the Polis* and *Plato and Aristotle*.

In both of these cases, Voegelin discerns movements toward differentiations of truths through leaps in being, epochal events that break the compactness of earlier cosmological myths.³ For example:

...[T]he Hellenic experience of God as the unseen measure of man is neither a sequel to the Israelite experience of the God who reveals himself from the thornbush to Moses and from Sinai to his people, nor even an intelligible advance beyond it in the sense in which both of these experiences differentiate a new truth about the order of being beyond the compact truth of the myth. The leap in being...occurs twice in the history of mankind....The two occurrences, while they run parallel in time and have in common their opposition to the Myth, are independent of each other; and the two experiences differ so profoundly in content that they become articulate in the two different symbolismes of Revelation and Philosophy.⁴

In *Israel and Revelation* we find the Hebraic battle between the prophets and the codifiers of the law, a battle between the prophetic call for retrospective interpretation of the law and a return to the theme of Exodus, on the one hand, and the rabbinical call for steadfastness in resistance to change, on the other.⁵ The steadfast resistance to change was a form of protective conservatorship which often lost sight of the meaning of the symbols and myths and often resulted in interpretations of the symbols and myths as teachings in and of themselves, rather than as the transmittive mode of meaning for which they were created. The elasticity of the symbols and myths was often lost in calcification and the meaning and applicability of the symbolizations became fixed. The responsibility of their decalcification and restoration rested on the shoulders of the prophets.

According to the Hebraic prophetic tradition, Judaism is a story of Exodus—a mass emigration of peoples toward a promised land of deliverance. Through a process of revelation in time and place, the history of Israel has unfolded an ever greater understanding of man and his relationship to the transcendent God by consistently and faithfully returning to the meaning of Exodus. The historical task of unfolding these truths, as well as communicating them to others, was the responsibility of the prophets. Beginning with the first prophet, Moses, whose name means to draw out, and moving through the successive generations of prophetic voices which faithfully cry out in the wilderness, calling the people of Israel to return to the deliverance of the Exodus, Voegelin presents to us the drama of the revelation of Yahwism in the history of Israel. He argues that the prophetic revelation of Yahwism is “the best recognizable ‘contribution’ of Israel to the civilization of mankind.”⁶

What is it within the prophetic vision of Yahwism that leads Voegelin to the conclusion that it is the best recognizable contribution of Israel to the civilization of mankind? It is the ability to recognize the truth contained within the symbols and revelations of Yahwism and, after doing so, to work toward a reformation of the way the religion is understood, through retrospective interpretation and the creation of new symbols and myths. The function of the prophet is to restore the inner form of history. In the case of Israel, the prophets’ mission was to call the people of Israel toward a transcendence over the despair of their mundane existence and toward an entry into a new life of forgiveness and spirituality. It was a call to recognize the order of God within the heart and the spiritual community, rather than clinging to the order of God in the political, earthly realm. Although the old order of pragmatic history was perceived by later prophets

(especially Deutero-Isaiah) as passing away, there had always been a latent tension between government and the vision of the prophet, even in the absence of such a perception. The task of the later prophets was to take the meaning which was left in the symbols of the historical narrative and, through retrospective interpretation, to create and sustain a new Israel.

The genius of the prophets is in their ability to recognize the necessity of evolution in the understanding of religious truths and their ability to re-interpret and recreate the symbols which communicate those truths. It is in the movement toward a recognition of Yahweh as a non-political, universal God that the prophetic revelation of Yahwism makes its best contribution to the civilization of mankind. Although "the universalism of the prophets was never quite successful, the reason...[is] in the political particularization of Yahweh, which the prophets themselves could never overcome radically, not even in the person of Deutero-Isaiah."⁷ But they tried, especially as they approached what they saw as the end of the old Israel in the pragmatic order of history. Whether through the insight of their own intelligence, or through divine revelation, or through a combination of both, the prophetic vision moved first, eschatologically, from the notion of an anointed King in time and within a concrete Israel, to a Messiah who would deliver the spiritual Israel forever, and second, to an "insight that existence under God means love, humility, and righteousness of action rather than legality of conduct...."⁸

The founding symbols and myths of the early historical, Hebraic narrative, before the codification of the truth, carried the basic theme to which the prophets continuously called the people back. It is the theme of Exodus—of deliverance—which runs through the story of Noah and the flood, through the drawing

out of Moses from the Nile, through the deliverance of the people from their bondage in Egypt and the calling forth of them from the desert forty years later. Although this recurrent Exodus theme runs throughout the historical narrative of the Israelites, and the prophets consistently call for the people to return to it and repent, its meaning became especially pronounced in the codification of the Torah.

The elevation and canonization of toroth to the rank of sacredness caused an immediate recognition of the inherent tension between the Word of God as spoken by the prophets and the Word of God as spoken in the Torah, because the setting down of the Torah in written form led to calcification in the form of a fundamentalism which lost sight of the meaning of the symbols and myths, and, instead, brought about an interpretation of the symbol as a teaching in and of itself, rather than as the transmittive mode of meaning for which it was created. Once this took place and the elasticity of the symbols was lost, it would seem that there was little left to interpret. However,

[i]n their imaginative project of the rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*) the codifiers...successfully translated the divine order of love into an institutional model, counteracting thereby the apotheosis of the state, as well as the conception of a secular order of law and government in isolation against spiritual order.⁹

The mission of the prophet was to recognize this counteraction against the deification of the state and secular order and to incorporate it into his teaching. The call to do so was necessitated by the rabbinical order, that protected the interpretation of the codified Torah and was resistant to changes or new interpretations. With the perception of an impending doom for the old political order of Israel, Isaiah and Jeremiah move "away

from the concrete Israel...."¹⁰ The banner of the prophetic crusade of movement away from the concrete Israel is taken further by the Deutero-Isaiah author, who presents us with yet another drama of Exodus. With the symbolic language of the prophetic, the prophet introduces three clusters of motives: one, the historical events of exile, the liberation through Cyrus, the fall of Babylon, and the vicissitudes of empire in general; two, the contraction of Israel into the solitary suffering of the prophet; and three, the message of new things that shapes them into the message of salvation and God's self-revelation as Creator, Lord and Judge, and Redeemer. In the prophet's vision of new things, he is symbolically explaining and recreating, through retrospective interpretation, the past history of revelation. The questions of the people's conduct now lies in the past, for

Israel has suffered for its defection, and it has been forgiven. The appeal is therefore no longer concerned with conduct as measured by the Sinaitic legislation, but with the acceptance of God the Redeemer.... [T]hrough Deutero-Isaiah, finally, there emerged from existential suffering the experience of redemption in the present, right here and now. The movement that we called the Exodus of Israel from itself, the movement from the order of the concrete society toward the order of redemption was thus completed.¹¹

A similar movement is made in Christianity by Saint Augustine, who holds that

the structure of history is the same as the structure of personal existence; and he [does] not hesitate to use, inversely, historical symbols to express the reality of personal tension.... His conception of history as a tale of two cities, intermingling from the beginning of mankind to its end, conceives it as a tale of man's personal exodus written large.¹²

Saint Augustine's analysis of the problem of exodus in both personal existence and that of a society is unsurpassed. Voegelin views it as "philosophically perfect"¹³ and argues that it is still a valid category today. The essence of Augustine's insight into exodus is his realization of the two ordering principles to man's soul, the love of self and the love of God:

Between these two centers there is continual tension: man is always inclined to fall into the love of self and away from the love of God. On the other hand, he is always conscious that he should orient himself by the love of God, and he tries to do so in many instances. Exodus is defined by St. Augustine as the tendency to abandon one's entanglements with the world, to abandon the love of self, and to turn toward the love of God.¹⁴

In *The World of the Polis* we find a similar movement taking place in regard to the realization of the unseemliness of the Hellenic symbols and myths and, in the call to transform the unseemly symbols, a movement or "ascent from the experienced world to a generative principle (*archê*)...."¹⁵ This search for transcendent order and truth, this movement toward exodus, eventually developed through the differentiation of the compact symbols of Greek poetic and religious symbols. This took the form of a realization of the unseemliness of the symbols, especially the symbol of man as the hero and the symbol of divinity in the gods. Once the unseemliness of the symbols began to be elucidated, it was only a matter of time before the metaphysical questions of first principles (*archai*) arose.

The search for first principles was a long and difficult process. From the mythical, epical poetry of Homer and Hesiod, Voegelin traces the development of Greek thought from the important thematic symbols of blindness and seeing in the words of the poets to the ideas of becom-

ing and being which will find their articulation in the works of later philosophers. With the penetration of the myth, we see a movement or "ascent from the experienced world to a generative principle (*archê*), be it water, fire or air...,"¹⁶ toward, eventually, an ever more universal understanding of the transcendent order of being in the thought of Plato and Aristotle.

In the passages of Homer, Pindar, and Hesiod, the seeds of the opposition of truth and falsity—of "the tension between true Being and the turgid stream of Becoming"¹⁷ are sown through the metaphorical symbols of blindness, seeing, and remembrance (true memory). However, the transition from myth to a more formal speculation can only come about by the leap in being, which becomes the new form called philosophy. Thus, when philosophy "begins to disengage itself from the myth...in the work of Hesiod inasmuch as in his *Theogony* the myth is submitted to a conscious intellectual operation, with the purpose of reshaping its symbols in such a manner that a 'truth' about order with universal validity will emerge."¹⁸ Hesiod addresses a fundamental question that, until his time, had been ignored in the pantheon of Greek myth: "The gods are immortal, but they come into being; and how did the first gods come into being?"¹⁹ The answer to this question is a transitional rudiment of metaphysics which will come about as a result of the leap in being and will become manifest in the metaphysical speculations of the Ionian and Milesian philosophers and those who followed them in their search for a generative principle.

The leap in being "assumed the form of personal existence of individual human beings under God,"²⁰ and this manifested itself in philosophy, which is "a symbolic form distinguished from myth and history by its reflective self-consciousness."²¹ These elucidations of the human soul (*psychê*), as well as the no-

tion of a transcendent God, come about as a result of the philosophical probing of the unseemliness of representations. As philosophy begins to exert its intellectual force and to penetrate the unseemly myths, "there appears the experience of divine and human universality as the motivating force."²² This can begin to be detected in the thought of Xenophanes, where there is a conscious movement toward the creation of symbolism for a universal divinity—a god who "is unborn, he did not come into being like the Hesiodian gods, he always stays in the same place...and from his unmoved position he sways all things through his mind (*noouphreni*)."²³

In pre-Socratic thought the search for first principles culminated in two experiences of the transcendent: the Milesian transcendence into nature and the Xenophantic universal transcendence. These two experiences have continued to exert their influences on human thought in the Western world even into the present.

This movement is exemplified in the Socratic attack against the sophistic misinterpretation of symbols, symbols which were developed by mystic philosophers for the expression of experiences of transcendence. The sophistic misinterpretation comes about because of an ignorance or denial of the experiential basis of the symbolizations and a separation of the symbols from that basis.²⁴

As noted previously, from the time of Homer onward, various symbolizations and myths were created by the Greeks which, when eventually differentiated by the various pre-Socratic philosophers, led to the realization of the transcendent order of being. This realization, however, was rooted in two different experiences of transcendence. In his analysis of Xenophanes, Voegelin distinguishes between these two experiences of transcendence in pre-Socratic thought,

leading to the respective symbols of an arche: the arche of "things" and the arche of a "universal divinity." In the first of these experiences nature in its infinite flow became transparent for an origin of the flow itself; in the second of these experiences the transcendence of the soul toward the realissimum was understood as the universal characteristic of all men. The two experiences were then interpreted as pointing toward the same transcendental reality, and the identity found its expression in the formula "the One is God."²⁵

These two experiences of transcendence are the Beginning and the Beyond. Many of the Hellenic thinkers immediately preceding the Sophists held to this formula. There was, through the differentiating power of early Greek philosophy, a greater and greater recognition of the two experiences of transcendence as well as the knowledge of the transcendent order of divine being identified in the formula: the One is God.

However, with the onslaught of sophistic teachings, there is a derailment from the two experiences of transcendence which had arisen through the recent differentiation of Hellenic symbols and myths; more importantly, there is a derailment from the knowledge that there is a transcendent order of being identified as the One is God. How and why did this derailment take place? How did symbols get overlooked or misunderstood during the dominance of the Sophists in Hellenic thought?

The [sophistic] thinker operates on symbols that have been developed by mystic-philosophers for the expression of experiences of transcendence. He proceeds by ignoring the experiential basis, separates the symbols from this basis as if they had a meaning independent of the experiences which they express, and with brilliant logic shows, what every philosopher knows, that they will lead to contradictions if they are misunderstood as propositions about objects in world-immanent experience.²⁶

The Sophists make this mistake because they are not oriented toward the truth of either of the experiences of the transcendent order of being. "The polymathie, the much-knowing [Sophist],...tries to become philosophical by substituting empirical generality for the universality of transcendence."²⁷ They are blinded by their inability to transcend the world of sense perception. And in their blindness, they are able to speculate only on the visible things of the world.

"The visionary philosopher, [on the other hand], since he has gone beyond the realm of sense perception, does not speculate on the plurality of things as given by the senses."²⁸ He, instead, is able to transcend the particularity of the senses to a discernment of the order of the universal. As previously noted, the Sophists misinterpreted the two symbols of archai: the arche of things and the arche of a universal divinity, and in so doing, they misinterpreted the identity of the transcendental reality identified in the expression: the One is God, which these two archai pointed toward.

The first arche, the arche of things, is misinterpreted in that the Sophist substitutes "empirical generality for the universality of transcendence."²⁹ In so doing, he has not found an origin or overarching first principle of the things, but has merely described the commonalities which things happen to share. He has failed to understand the meaning of the arche of things and, instead, has found only a method of classifying things into similar categories.

The second arche, the arche of the universal divinity, was meant to symbolize the transcendence of the soul toward the realissimum (most real dimension of being), which was understood as the universal participatory nature of the human soul with the realissimum as characteristic of all men, but the Sophists misinterpreted this symbol, through ignorance of its experiential basis, by once

again immanentizing the experience into object and declaring: Man is the measure of all things.

Finally, the transcendental reality which both experiences had been pointing to, namely, the One is God, crumbled into nothingness under the Sophistic requirement that visibility is the criterion of existence.

The many need gods with "shapes." When the "shapes" of the gods are destroyed with social effectiveness, the many will not become mystics but agnostics. The enlightened empiricist...is an enlightened polytheist who is spiritually not strong enough for faith.³⁰

The insensitiveness of the Sophists to the meaning of the Hellenic symbolizations had the "result of destroying philosophy—for philosophy by definition has its center in the experience of transcendence."³¹

Upon the grave that they dug for philosophy, the Sophists erected their artifices of rhetoric. The "mystic philosopher had no information to tender; he [could] only communicate the discovery which he had made in his own soul, hoping that such communication would stir up parallel discoveries in the souls of others."³² The much-knowing encyclopedic Sophists had many wares to sell, and sell them they did. The result was that "[t]eaching...became information about things and training in skills; learning [could not] be the intimate movement in which a slumbering soul awakens and opens to a differentiated, mature soul."³³ But in the midst of this despair, the intimate movement of a slumbering soul did awaken, and the movement opened itself to the differentiated, mature soul of Socrates, who tore down the rhetorical artifices of the Sophists and resurrected Greek philosophy.

That philosophy shares the same communication problems that exist in myths, poetry, and revelations is important. Al-

though philosophy does attempt to communicate truth more precisely than these other modes of expressing meaning, and it even perhaps succeeds to a greater degree of clarity and precision, it, too, in the end, can only paint us a picture or image of truth. At best, the advent of philosophy does not, and cannot, solve (in the sense of complete differentiation) the compactness of meaning within our symbolizations. It can only refine, and when all is said and done, all human communication and, therefore, all truth claims, must be performed through metaphor and analogy. This is why the "Studies in the History of Political Ideas" was ultimately abandoned in favor of *Order and History*. The theological and philosophical significances of this discovery "lie in this very attempt at symbolic reinvigoration and spiritual renewal."³⁴

The implications of this assertion for epistemology, and therefore, for education, are radical. How can we be said to know a part or a whole of reality when we can represent or articulate only through metaphor and analogy?

There is no autonomous, nonparadoxical language, ready to be used by man as a system of signs when he wants to refer to the paradoxical structures of reality and consciousness. Words and their meanings are just as much a part of the reality to which they refer as the being things are partners in the comprehending reality; language participates in the paradox of a quest that lets reality become luminous for its truth by pursuing truth as a thing intended....From the analysis there emerges the complex of consciousness-reality-language as a something that receives its character as a unit through the pervasive presence of another something, called the paradox of intentionality and luminosity, of thing-ness and It-ness.³⁵

We must learn to live in the tensional gray. We all recognize this when we hear the familiar joke about the difference between an entering college freshman

and a graduating college senior. The senior walks out knowing much less than the freshman walking in the door. This is the wisdom of Socrates as revealed by the Delphic oracle. It is time that academics return to this Socratic wisdom, both for themselves and for their students and society. We, as teachers, must constantly reevaluate our approach in the classroom to ensure that we model ourselves after that greatest of teachers who humbly recognized that his wisdom was in his recognition of his own ignorance.

If we are to be intellectually honest, our linguistic symbols must live within the tension between the priestly and the prophetic. A consistent movement toward the pole of either results in ideological thinking, either too far to the left or too far to the right. If our free and democratic society is to survive, our educational models must return to a love of wisdom, rather than a love of this or that ideological dogma. We must return to the dictum of Socrates: "Know thyself." We must recognize that we live and think in a polar reality—and resist the temptation that is always present to reduce our reality into this or that dogmatic system.

Specifically, insofar as the particularities of our universities are concerned,

we must reawaken a love for the liberal arts—philosophy, religion, science, and logic in our students, and we must reincorporate them into our core curricula. Rather than the movement toward teaching a plethora of overly narrow courses that prop up this or that ideological position, we must work toward teaching the student "how" to think, and not so much "what" to think. On the part of teachers, this requires a respect and trust in the dignity and sanctity of the student to make his or her own intellectual and spiritual journey. The teacher must refrain from "professing" to the student "the answers," and instead trust that the paths set out by millennia of great intellectual and spiritual symbolizations will lead the student on his or her own path to truth.

As Plato understood so many centuries ago, the teacher can only point the way up the incline to the outside where the sun shines, the prisoner must ultimately finish the journey toward freedom and enlightenment. We must resist the temptation to give the student our vision, and instead, strive to lead the student to a path that will lead him to his or her own vision of "the Good," that place where the polarities of our thinking come to rest and find ultimate peace.

1. Henry Regnery, *A Few Reasonable Words: Selected Writings* (Wilmington, Del., 1996), 3-4. 2. A good discussion of both Voegelin's and Bernard Lonergan's view of the priestly and prophetic modes of theological expression is offered by Michael P. Morrissey in *Consciousness and Transcendence: The Theology of Eric Voegelin* (Notre Dame, 1994), 220. Both Lonergan and Voegelin "would criticize the conceptualist reductionism of doctrine, the obstructionist tendency of doctrine to derail the experiential quest for truth among the spiritually insensitive....[and] [b]oth would affirm the usefulness of doctrine to preserve experiential insights...." 3. For a discussion of Voegelin's theory of compactness and differentiation, see Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, 54, 133-138, 158, 164-166, 218, 259, 279. Also see Joseph Michael Anthony McCarroll, "The Advance from

Compactness to Differentiation," M.A. Thesis, National University of Ireland, 1982. Also see Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Eric Voegelin's Significance for the Modern Mind*, 108-110, 113-121, 167-172. 4. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol. II, *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge, 1957), 1. 5. For a critical appraisal of Voegelin's analysis of the Old Testament and the Hebraic tradition, see Bernhard W. Anderson, "Politics and the Transcendent: Eric Voegelin's Philosophical and Theological Analysis of the Old Testament in the Context of the Ancient Near East," in *Political Science Reviewer*, Vol. 1 (1971), 1-30. 6. *Israel and Revelation*, 186. 7. *Ibid.*, 216. 8. *Ibid.*, 440. 9. *Ibid.*, 377. 10. *Ibid.*, 491. 11. *Ibid.*, 500-501. 12. "Immortality: Experience and Symbol," in *The Collected Works*, Vol. 12, 78. 13. *Ibid.*, 105. 14. *Ibid.*, 105. 15. *The World of the Polis*, 133-134. 16. *Ibid.*, 133-134. 17. *Ibid.*, 73. 18. *Ibid.*, 126. 19. *Ibid.*, 134.

20. *Ibid.*, 169. 21. *Ibid.*, 170. A good definition of reflective distance is offered by Paul Caringella in "Voegelin: Philosopher of Divine Presence," in *Eric Voegelin's Significance for the Modern Mind*, 177. 22. *The World of the Polis*, 178. 23. *Ibid.*, 180-181. 24. For an excellent discussion of Voegelin's treatment of Plato and Plato's attack on the Sophists, see Thomas J. Farrell, "Eric Voegelin on Plato and the Sophists," in *Communication and Lonergan: Com-*

mon Ground for Forging the New Age, ed. Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (Kansas City, Mo., 1993), 108-136. 25. *The World of the Polis*, 234. 26. *Ibid.*, 275. 27. *Ibid.*, 281. 28. *Ibid.*, 208. 29. *Ibid.*, 281. 30. *Ibid.*, 239. 31. *Ibid.*, 275. 32. *Ibid.*, 283. 33. *Ibid.*, 283. 34. *Consciousness and Transcendence: The Theology of Eric Voegelin*, 230. 35. *Order and History*, Vol. V, *In Search of Order* (Baton Rouge, 1987), 17-18.