The New York Times
and Eric Voegelin

As a native New Englander who at an early age somehow intuited a peculiar provincialism that characterizes local newspapers of that region of the country, I have been a regular reader of The New York Times for nearly four decades. Actually my introduction to that great national newspaper came after my first being introduced by a neighbor — a Communist — to the now defunct PM. That newspaper, to the horror of my family, excitingly tainted much of my early social-political thinking in ways that, in time, I myself found blemished and contaminative. Later, after several years of brutal public school teaching, and just barely out of my teens, I realized that the gospel of the liberal left preached by Ralph Ingersoll's PM, and of everything in the liberal persuasion that it reflected and was symptomatic of, was discreditable. The Times, in any case, was far more even-handed and restrained in its reporting of the news, as I came to find.

If through the years the Times has been my daily news educator, I have become more discriminating in my own judgmental responses to its reportorial management of "All the News That's Fit to Print." That is, I have had to learn how to detect in the Times those editorial subtleties, those quietly controlled but ever-present biases, that patronizing liberal tone, with its implicit innuendoes, its insidious divertissements and données, that call for one's intellectual resistance, if not for one's rebuttal, if one is not to be stamped by the Times' editorial line (no less than, for a period, I was stamped by the Max Lerners and I. F. Stones of PM).

Dutifully I continue to read the Times on a regular basis, though increasingly I find substantive reasons to quarrel with its editorial policies and opinions and its overall arrangement and presentation of the news. I have learned, of course, not to expect to gain any spiritual edification from the Times, even as I have learned to distrust, or at least to question, the Times' "monopoly of virtue," to use an apt phrase that appears as the title of Russ Braley's concluding chapter in his absorbing book, Bad News: The Foreign Policy of the New York Times, recently published by Regnery Gateway. (This book confirms some of my own feelings and suspicions as these have been germinating these past forty years!)
I do not intend to go into matters here that Mr. Braley examines with authoritative care and awareness in his book, which I am glad to recommend to those who are concerned with the various ways in which the *Times* influences American foreign and domestic policies. Though I am also concerned with these influences, I am more concerned at this moment with directing readers' attention to the way in which the *Times* chooses to treat the life and achievement of thinkers whose "ideas have consequences." No occasion reminds me more of just how derelict and dismissive the *Times* can be in its treatment of great conservative expositors than in its recent notice reporting the death of Eric Voegelin at the age of 84 in California on January 19, 1985. The full text of the obituary notice, as belatedly printed in the *Times*, on January 23, is worth quoting in full if only to catch the perfunctory tenor of the notice and all of its neutralist and abjectly factual elements, those very elements that cumulatively seek to convey an objectivity that, in reality, is informed by ignorance and slight.

One finds in the *Times*' obituary notice the absolute absence of any kind of sympathetic understanding or illumination of the life and work of a great philosopher and teacher. One will also discover that at the heart of this absence is what Mr. Braley calls a "*Times* ideology," that is, a way of seeing and presenting things, defining or expressing a point of view, identifying a particular predisposition, in short, pinpointing what can be perceived as still another example of a journalistic orthodoxy of enlightenment that erases "the faculty of attention" (as Henry James calls it), which should be fully and disinterestedly engaged in the adjudicative critical process. Here, at any rate, is the entire text of the *Times*' obituary notice of Voegelin's death, found under the caption, "Eric Voegelin, Philosopher, Author, and Professor, Dies":

Eric Voegelin, a German-born philosopher, author, and professor who fled the Nazis from the University of Vienna during World War II, died last Saturday at his home on the campus of Stanford University in Stanford, Calif. He was 84 years old.

Professor Voegelin, who became a United States citizen in 1944, taught at Harvard, the University of Alabama and Louisiana State University. In 1968, he went to Stanford as a distinguished research scholar.

His works included *The New Science of Politics* and *Order and History*, a four-volume work on historical philosophy. He was working on a fifth volume at his death.

He is survived by his wife, Lissy.

Clearly this obituary notice lacks any appreciative note of friendliness, or sympathy, or comprehension. It simply and expeditiously records the death of a philosopher and teacher, as it would that of some business figure, or convicted criminal, or political underling, or pop musician of yesteryear. No recognition of the greatness of Voegelin as man and thinker is indicated anywhere in the report of his death and in the mere listing of his magisterial publications. It would, in fact, be embarrassingly impossible for the *Times* to quote from any of its own reviews of Voegelin's writings precisely because there has never been a single review of any one of Voegelin's books, as can be easily and distressingly verified by examining *The New York Times Index*. For the *Times* Voegelin has never existed and his work has never been deemed important. This neglect is a scandalous example of the positivistic proclivity that afflicts the *Times* as much as it afflicts social and intellectual conditions in general in the United States. And it is precisely this proclivity that would find inescapably antipathetic a philosophical thinker who sees history as "a mystery in process of revelation" and who insists that "God and man, world and society, form a primordial community of being." To modern positivists and empiricists such views are held in contempt, to be eliminated in any way possible.
Indeed, when one looks at the listed reviews of Voegelin's major books, what is notoriously evident is that not only the *Times* but also major journals of opinion have more often than not chosen not to take notice. The recognition of a philosophical and spiritual genius, in other words, has not been generously forthcoming, or if it has, it has been negligible and even grudging. In this respect the skimpy obituary notice in the *Times* serves as a representative instance of how Voegelin's achievement has been perceived and treated through the years by academic philosophers and political theorists and scientists, who for Voegelin himself provide "a very good picture of the intellectual corruption and destruction which characterize the contemporary academic world." That Voegelin, as Ellis Sandoz remarks, remained a philosopher and physician rather than becoming a prophet and healer has additional relevance here: Voegelin rejects the kind of panaceas offered by positivism, Marxism, and Freudianism, and such a rejection entails considerable consequences in a liberal society.

Voegelin had the kind of standards of integrity that preclude popular acceptance and success. In refusing to endear himself either to the powerful Eastern intellectual community or, for that matter, to the *Times* ethos, Voegelin refused to play the game that pundits like the Galbraiths and the Schlesingers play so cleverly and rewardingly. None of these influential figures would ever have the temerity to assert, as does Voegelin with absolute conviction and candor, "that the history of philosophy is in the largest part the history of its derailment." Such a defiant, uncompromising assertion directly challenges the climate of opinion as we know it in the academy and all its affiliates. Inevitably those who pose such a disquieting challenge — and here one also thinks of Irving Babbitt in an earlier period and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn today — become marked men, dissident thinkers consigned to fateful obscurity in the Gorky that obviously extends beyond a Soviet oblast.

The fact remains that in his writings and world view, Voegelin indicted the sacred idols, the *doxai*, of technologico-Benthamite civilization, and that his indictment emerges from a deeply spiritual conception of human existence and an affirmation of the experience of transcendence and of "the permanent things." "The long history of post-classical Western Gnosticism," he declares, "appears in its continuity as the history of Western sectarianism." Surely, pan-*Times* sectaries, and the "libidinous profiteers," as Voegelin calls them, who are everywhere in commanding positions of power and influence, could hardly condone such a declaration. To say, as does Voegelin, that "the destiny of man lies not in the future but in eternity," is to utter an indiscretion in a Sartrean world, East and West, which scornfully rejects the Logos (or, for that matter, any consonant logocentric accettion of life, literature, and thought).

To appeal, too, to the past for paradigms of meaning, or to reflect, for instance, on classical studies, on their purpose and prospects, for apprehension of the order of man’s existence, as well as of man’s nature, is for Voegelin (as he tells us in his remarkable essay "On Classical Studies" in the winter 1973 issue of *Modern Age*) a sacred noetic task, a living principle of thought and belief. Such reflection requires a greater heroism in a world in which moral virtues have been abridged. Voegelin never lacked moral or intellectual heroism. He steadfastly refused to capitulate to the agents of reductionism who legislate what he calls "the two closely related processes of the fragmentation of science through specialization and the deculturation of Western society." Doubtlessly no amount of paraphrase or of critical commentary can ever replace Voegelin’s diagnosis of the inorganic conception of the world that prevails in modern culture and society. His words, as we read and meditate on them in the following extract from "On Classical Studies," an essay which should be required reading for all teachers and students (but won’t be, things being what
they are in an educational world in which preside the priests of deconstructionism, the chic contemporary version of Jacobinism), hold an urgent message that we can dismiss only at our peril:

The public interest has shifted from the nature of man to the nature of nature and to the prospects of domination its exploration opened; and the loss of interest even turned to hatred when the nature of man proved to be resistant to the changes dreamed up by intellectuals who want to add the lordship of society and history to the mastery of nature. The alliance of indifference and hatred, both inspired by libido dominandi, has created the climate that is not favorable to an institutionalized study of the nature of man. . . . The protagonists of the Western deculturation process are firmly established in our universities.

We choose our intellectual and spiritual heroes elsewhere. Not Eric Voegelin but Herbert Marcuse is the modern philosophical and political thinker that the Times honors by the attention it showers upon him. Where the Times could assemble only seven sentences to report Voegelin's death, it displayed on August 31, 1979, a long article by Kenneth A. Briggs on the death of Marcuse. He is described as "a guiding figure of many social activists of the 1960's because of his radical Marxist critique of Western capitalism," especially his Marxist and Freudian "indictment of American society, which he called a 'repressive monolith.'" Reference is made to Marcuse's influence on student radicals, especially his most famous student, Angela Davis, in the civil rights and anti-war movements. Briggs remarks that Marcuse believed that for reason and science to create a "new man" and a "new age," violence was justified. What Marcuse, looking back on the 1960s, later told an interviewer is quoted as follows:

You see, the heroic period was that of the hippies and yippies. They did their thing. They did an indispensable job. They were heroes. They probably still are, but we have moved into a different period, a higher period in terms of historical sequence. We are now in the midst of the organized counterrevolution. You cannot have fun with fascism.

Briggs also notes some of the reasons for a decline in Marcuse's influence as the social unrest of the 1960s diminished, stressing at the same time that Marcuse drew passionate criticism from a variety of sources: "He was the object of verbal assaults by, among others, former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, former California Gov. Ronald Reagan and the American Legion." The obituary article glances at the political perspective of Marcuse's ideas: "In most of his work, the soft-spoken philosopher aimed at an analysis that transcended national boundaries. He saw both the Soviet and American systems as repressive." That, too, Marcuse regarded the "sexual revolution" with disdain and that he saw drugs as a form of enslavement are points stressed by Briggs, who goes on to say: "In flower power, in the language of the hippies and the street people, in their coarse and abusive epithets, Dr. Marcuse found traces of a truly radical ethic."

The preceding synopsis of the Times' obituary of Herbert Marcuse is given here in order to underline the seriousness and the attentiveness with which Marcuse's reputation and influence are invested. It is a commendably full and informative obituary account, exactly what one would naturally expect to find in a distinguished national newspaper. Reinforcing the significance of the obituary account, it should be further noted, is an editorial entitled "The Power of Negative Thinking," which appears in the same issue of the Times and which echoes Briggs's own words as it concludes:

Herbert Marcuse was tolerated, and he caused a great stir. In fact, a dozen of his books are still in print. But the days of violent protest have faded and so has Marcuse's notoriety. Did his fate prove his theory? He may have wondered.
Yet it's more likely that his critique, while generally interesting, was too flawed to sustain the excitement.

But such a conclusion, portentous, and cavalier, of the vintage that one has slowly come to expect in the liberal temper and idiom, will not appease those dissidents among us who witnessed and suffered the events of the sixties as these were inspired by Marcuse's defined goal of the destruction of society and his aversion to any piety for past achievements, for that saving and transcending principle of humanitas that George Eliot, more than a century ago, expressed in words that Herbert Marcuse, "nihilist heresiarch" of the modern age, could hardly begin to understand: "The first condition of human goodness is something to love, the second something to reverence." We tend to forget, as does the Times leader writer, that a philosopher's ideas have consequences and that inferior ideas have particularly bad consequences. The things he says and writes and teaches can have enduring impact and, as in the case of Marcuse, inspire acts of rebellion and disorder that make it impossible to counter what Richard M. Weaver terms "perversions of truths and acts of bestiality." To grasp both the legacy of impiety and the full extent of Marcusean excrescences, one cannot rely on the Times obituary and editorial. For such an understanding one is well advised to turn to Eliseo Vivas's remarkable scrutiny as found in his book Contra Marcuse (1971).

Here the point I want to make is that, in terms of attention and emphasis, the Times gives almost a kind of institutional sanction to a radical philosopher that it obviously withholds from a Voegelin. That, to be sure, is an editorial choice, but one that also alerts us to the prevailing attitude when the obituary occasion presents itself. In the end, the notarizing of Marcuse and the disregard of Voegelin are curiously characteristic of the Times' liberalism that, as Braley would say, spells "bad news." If the Times, then, chooses to ignore the stature of a thinker like Voegelin, what can one expect from the other newspapers in the country? It mythicizes a man like Marcuse — "He had white hair and spoke in a thick accent and influenced thousands of mostly middle-class white American college students in the Sixties and early Seventies," reads the second sentence in the Times editorial — and barely notices a man like Voegelin, what he stands for, the insight and wisdom he conveys, the moral and spiritual principles that he defines and defends and that prompt him to say of the Homeric — and of this — world: "the disorder of a society was a disorder in the soul of its component members."

For the Times-men and their doctrinaire relativistic faith Voegelin's statement is no doubt meaningless when viewed against what, for example, Marcuse writes in One-Dimensional Man. We are urged, it seems, to sanctify Marcusean "negations" and at the same time to scorn Voegelinian "visions of order." In this disorientation, as it might be described, we discern a prescribed debasement of life as we are led deeper and deeper into a "culture of abundance," as well as a "culture of celebrity." Again Weaver's words are particularly apropos here: "Thus present-day reformers combat dilution by diluting further, dispersion by a more vigorous dispersing." Increasingly and fatally we choose to dramatize "organized counter-revolution" and frown upon the discipline of character. An unbelieving thinker like Marcuse is for us the center, as the Times would lead us to assume.

"Order and History," asserts Russell Kirk, "will restore to some modern minds an understanding of transcendence." Clearly the modern age has become what Henri de Lubac has called "the drama of atheist humanism" as it has been relentlessly enacted in the demise of transcendence and the triumph of immanentism. No thinker has better diagnosed the essential conditions that have led to this cruel metastasis than has Voegelin. No thinker has more boldly or keenly viewed the pendulum motion of order and disorder simultaneously striking
in the human psyche and in the cosmos. And no thinker has ventured to express with such uncompromising determination the tensive connections between the life of the soul and the life of the civil polity: "... the diagnosis of health and disease in the soul is ... at the same time a diagnosis of order and disorder in society." Voegelin's words emerge from the ground and truth of his vision; they compel us to recognize the need to return to a consciousness of principles. Surely no contemporary thinker has been more daring in raising central questions that have too often been egregiously ignored. Why, he thus asks in "Remembrance of Things Past," a new first chapter written by Voegelin especially for the American edition of Anamnesis (1978 [1966]), "why do important thinkers like Comte or Marx refuse to apperceive what they apperceive quite well? why do they expressly prohibit anybody to ask questions concerning the sectors of reality they have excluded from their personal horizon? why do they want to imprison themselves in their restricted horizon and to dogmatize their prison reality as the universal truth? and why do they want to lock up all mankind in the prison of their making?"

What is most strikingly symptomatic of the modern period, according to Voegelin, is "the perversion of reason," which he believes "has grown ... into the murderous grotesque of our time." The special constituents of this process as these have shaped the climate of opinion embody for Voegelin the rhythm of deformation that visibilizes in "the concentration camps of totalitarian regimes and the gas chambers in which the grotesqueness of opinion becomes the murderous reality of action." No words better capture the diagnostic acumen found in Voegelin's achievement. It is alarming, then, that the astonishing nature of his achievement, anchored as it is in history and learning, has been scanted by the Times and by those in the intellectual community who prefer to bask in modern Gnostic experiences — progressivism, utopianism, revolutionary activism. Yet, as Voegelin declares in The New Science of Politics, "... since the life of the spirit is the source of order in man and society, the very success of a Gnostic civilization is the cause of its decline."

No less than Plato, Voegelin apprehended the cardinal facts. What Emerson says of Plato is equally true of Voegelin: "His sense deepens, his merits multiply, with study." Modern Age through the years has sought to salute the power of genius that informs Voegelin's contribution. One who explores past issues of Modern Age will find in them numerous reviews and critiques of Voegelin's meaning and importance written, inter alios, by such gifted commentators as John P. East, John H. Hallowell, Thomas Molnar, Gerhart Niemeyer, Peter Stanlis, Harold L. Weatherby, and Frederick Wilhelmsen. One would be exceedingly hard pressed to find a comparable body of critical evaluations of Voegelin in any other journal of thought and opinion. This fact in itself helps to vindicate the very existence of a serious quarterly review that fully and responsibly perceives the value of its critical function. Modern Age counts it an exceptional and reverent privilege in helping to establish Voegelin's place among the truly great philosophical thinkers of the West.

In death, as in life, Eric Voegelin remains a spoudaios, a mature man; a sophos, a sage; and, above all, the aristas phylax, the best guardian, of a civilized world of reason, dignity, and order.

— George A. Panichas