



Vico's Cyclical History

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Vico's Cyclical History

'Corsi e Ricorsi', review of Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Donald Phillip Verene (eds), *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity* (Baltimore, 1976: Johns Hopkins University Press), *Journal of Modern History* 50 no. 3 (September 1978), 480–9



Giambattista Vico by David Levine, 1969

THE HISTORY of Vico's reputation is an ironical reflection of his own cyclical theory of culture: obscure beginnings, slow development, rise to fame and influence, followed by an inevitable decline and fall, after which the entire cycle is repeated once again – we cannot be sure how soon or how often.

More than half a century passed after the publication of the first edition of Vico's most original and important work, the *Scienza nuova*, before any serious attention was paid to it outside his native city. Herder's friend Hamann sent for it from Königsberg in 1777: when it arrived, he made nothing of it. There was some criticism of it in Germany at the time of publication; Thomasius had heard of

Vico; but the founders of modern historical method, the Göttingen professors of the later eighteenth century, knew nothing of the author or his work; passing references to the *Scienza nuova* by Goethe and Herder showed no genuine acquaintance with it. It was admired in Naples and, perhaps, briefly in Venice. Despite the propaganda by Italian scholars – Duni, Genovesi, Cesarotti, Pagano, the abbé Galiani – and later by Italian exiles in Paris at the turn of the century, and by Orelli and the poet Leopardi in Rome, despite some interest in his ideas taken by such secondary figures as Chastellux, Degérando, Maistre, Fauriel, Jacobi, Victor Cousin and Coleridge, he remained largely unread and unknown: at most, a curious, half-forgotten provincial writer in the margin of scholarship and thought.

His rescuer and most eloquent champion was Jules Michelet, whose imagination was deeply stirred by the *New Science*. Michelet's free version of Vico's doctrines, published in 1824, and, above all, his fervent advocacy, for a while gave Vico European fame. Marx, Thomas Arnold, Buckle, Ballanche and Herzen spoke of him with respect from very different points of view. But although Michelet continued to draw inspiration from his writings until the end of his life (or so he claimed), the inevitable decline in Vico's fame duly set in. Despite highly intelligent and lucid monographs by Karl Werner in Germany and Robert Flint in England, it was due solely to the insistence of Benedetto Croce, who admired and was profoundly influenced by him, that Windelband agreed to add a footnote on Vico in his famous history of philosophy. Still, he did not remain totally unknown even in the North: Yeats and Joyce read him – *Finnegans Wake* is full of Vico – he was discussed in prerevolutionary Russia; Georges Sorel in Paris wrote a long essay on his doctrines in the 1890s: a new cycle, a *ricorso*, had begun.

For this Croce was almost wholly responsible: his celebrated study of Vico's thought, and the great edition of Vico's entire work, the main direction of which Croce, in effect, entrusted to Fausto Nicolini, who devoted his long life to it, bore fruit beyond the frontiers of [481] Italy. R. G. Collingwood's English translation of Croce's book appeared in 1913; it was followed by a chapter in the first volume of C. E. Vaughan's *Studies in the History of Political Philosophy before and after Rousseau* in 1921,¹ an essay by Thomas

¹ [Published posthumously in 1925.]

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Whittaker in 1926, a brilliant short study by Erich Auerbach in 1932 (translated from German into English only in 1959), and, finally, a full-length expository work by H. P. Adams in 1935.

Vico's star began, albeit slowly, to rise again. In 1944, the bicentenary year of Vico's death, T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch published their English version of Vico's *Autobiography*, furnished with a full and illuminating introduction. This was followed by their translation of the third edition of the *New Science* of 1744. Interest in the old Neapolitan in English-speaking countries increased dramatically. If he was neglected earlier by Anglo-American philosophers, there were several reasons for this. Few British or American philosophers read Italian: Vico's elaborate, convoluted, 'baroque' prose, archaic even in its own time, with its constant digressions, occult references, esoteric allusions, and lack of any apparent order or easily intelligible structure, faced the reader with a huge and impassable jungle which discouraged even the intellectually enterprising. Moreover, the topic itself was far removed from the main currents of Anglo-American philosophical tradition. Epistemology, philosophical logic, moral and political thought, all with a strongly empirical bias, lie at the centre of modern British and American philosophical writing; theories of history, of culture, of the presuppositions of the social sciences, tended at best to be relegated to studies of inductive logic. It is a curious fact that, even during the Hegelian interlude in English thought, it was the logical, metaphysical, ethical, and political implications of Idealism that for the most part occupied the minds of T. H. Green and Bradley, Bosanquet and McTaggart, Royce and Joachim; the vision of history which is at the heart of everything Hegel ever wrote – without which, indeed, it is scarcely possible to grasp its shape and purpose – seemed to be all but excluded from their horizons.

This may seem strange, even astonishing; and was, indeed, so considered in philosophical circles in Germany and Italy, and has lately, in part under the influence of Marxism, come under criticism from some native critics, who, in this, respect, echo the sharp attacks delivered at an earlier period by Croce's best-known English disciple, R. G. Collingwood. Yet lack of historical consciousness (the shortcomings of which need no stressing today) has its advantages: intellectual progress does not always seem to depend on a developed sense of history – if anything, it can be an obstacle to it; individual thinkers, and entire societies, take what they need from

the thought of the past without too much bother about its accurate reconstruction, and absorb, interpret, misunderstand, reject and transform such ideas very freely, according to the needs, interests, and outlook of their own time and place and social conditions; such ideas are refracted (at times oddly) in what the *Annales* school of historians has called the *mentalité* of classes or groups, and change their form and sense in response to the demands of individual genius. But while the absence of historical self-awareness, or even systematic blindness to, or distortion of, the thought of the past, may, at times, be indispensable to intellectual development in original directions, this is acquired at a price: for it leads to the falsification of the history of ideas, to arbitrary or ignorant or anachronistic accounts of the outlooks of groups, societies or entire civilisations.

Whether more is lost on the swings of historical understanding than is made up on the roundabouts of philosophical [482] or sociological progress is an idle question: no such calculation can be made. But let me add this: the first man to raise this issue – to ask himself about the role of changing concepts and categories, indeed, about the very possibility of an examination of this process from an Archimedean standpoint outside the historical march of ideologies, and (as part of this question) about the very possibility of accounting for the relations of changing types of symbolic forms to the reality they are used to communicate, and indeed, shape – and to raise the issue a century before Hegel's *Phenomenology* and all the varieties of nineteenth-century historicism – and therefore the man who can justly be called the pioneer of the sociology and psychology of knowledge and imaginative expression (which dominates so much aesthetic and, in particular, literary criticism today) is the thinker of genius to whom this volume is dedicated. Often dark, confused, naive, overambitious, unscholarly even by the standards of his time, his mind clogged with ill-sorted antiquarian bric-a-brac, Vico opened a door which before him had scarcely been known to exist; for those who entered by it, the landmarks of world history, of society, perhaps of art and literature too, were altered even in English-speaking countries.

It was this type of enquiry that culminated in the celebrated 'crisis of historicism', most acutely felt in German-speaking countries in the last years of the nineteenth century. The impact of relativism and historical determinism, the celebrated controversies of Marxists

and neo-Kantians, historicist and positivists, the doctrinal writings of Dilthey and Max Weber, Windelband, Rickert and Troeltsch, Plekhanov, Max Adler, Labriola and Croce, were little noticed by academic philosophers in England or America. Collingwood alone paid serious attention to some of these thinkers: his efforts to stimulate interest in the issues that had had, and were having, a decisive influence not only on European thought but on revolutionary politics, met with scarcely any response among his compatriots. His translation of Croce's study of Vico remained, by and large, unnoticed. Well might it be said, if one scans the pages of *Mind*, in the words which Vico addressed to his contemporaries, one 'cannot but marvel that philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of nature, which, since God made it, he alone knows: and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations, [...] which, since men had made it, men could come to know.'² Yet it was so. Anglo-American philosophy has not developed a historical consciousness. It may have gained more by this than it has lost; but whether this is so or not, this is one of the factors responsible for the gulf, never wider than at present, which divides it from contemporary philosophy in German and Latin countries. It is this anti-historical tendency that served to put Vico's most striking ideas beyond its ken.

The translation of the *Scienza nuova* by Bergin and Fisch, published in 1948, and the excellent commentaries with which it was provided by Max Fisch, did something to alter this. After this date, Anglo-American interest in Vico rose notably. The full bibliographies with which both the recent English symposia on Vico are furnished – that edited by Giorgio Tagliacozzo [483] and Hayden White in 1969³ and the present volume – demonstrate the vast increase in books and articles on Vico and cognate subjects during the last thirty years. We owe this principally to two men: Max H. Fisch, whose editions, articles, introductions and notes are a primary source of historical and philosophical light; and Giorgio Tagliacozzo, an Italian scholar in America, whose devotion and energy generated the publication in 1968 of a collection of some

² T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch (eds and trans.), *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, 3rd ed. (Ithaca, NY, 1968), 96 (§ 331).

³ Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Hayden V. White (eds), *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium* (Baltimore, 1969).

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forty articles in English by specialists drawn from many disciplines. The 1969 volume was widely reviewed, and marked the highest peak of international interest in Vico's thought since the 1830s and 1840s. The new *ricorso* was now plainly on its upward path: another volume – that under review – followed with twenty-nine contributions by a similar array of scholars, together with a translation, the first in English, based on Nicolini's editions of Vico's *Pratica* of 1731, of one of Vico's unceasing additions and corrections, which he incorporated in the third edition of the *Scienza nuova* in 1744 in an endless process which only the author's death cut short. Nor was this the last of Giorgio Tagliacozzo's services to the memory of Vico: early in 1976 a second symposium, organised by him, took place in New York: its richly heterogeneous *Proceedings* saw the light in the following year.⁴ Yet another conference is due to be held this year in Venice. No thinker has ever been more generously rewarded for 'the night of thick darkness'⁵ that for so long enveloped his work and name in his own time.

One of Vico's boldest ideas is his conviction that one of the paths to the understanding of the succession of cultural phases is the study of language – and in particular of modes of expression such as synecdoche, metonymy, metaphor and so forth, which are not merely indispensable rhetorical devices, but determine – indeed, shape – the interpretation and communication of reality on the part of entire civilisations, so that the passage from one to the other of these rhetorical 'tropes' marks deep cultural transformations. Hayden White's essay on this in the volume under review is exceptionally imaginative and suggestive, even when his bold reconstruction of Vico's theses seems to go far beyond the text. His essay is complemented by the parallel drawn by Nancy Stuever between Vico, Valla and Renaissance rhetoric in general; her discussion of Vico's novel attention to the pre-logical stage of imaginative symbolism (*homo non intellegendo fit omnia*)⁶ and of his idea of a universal 'mental dictionary'⁷ of socially determined concepts, viewed as part of his attempt to construct a kind of genetic epistemology involved in the very process of the formation of

⁴ *Social Research* 43 nos 3 and 4 (Autumn and Winter 1976).

⁵ *loc. cit.* (note 2 above).

⁶ 'Man beomes all things by not undertsanding them', *ibid.*, 130 (§ 405).

⁷ 182.

human communities, seems to me an original, fruitful and valid approach to Vico's entire enterprise – to his new *scienza*, the construction of which, he tells us, cost him a good twenty years of unremitting labour.

Proceeding on similar lines, Alessandro Giuliani traces Vico's anti-Cartesian method of argument to Graeco-Roman rhetoric (with an appropriate bow to a modern champion, Chaim Perelman). Robert J. di Pietro illuminates Vico's conception of the relation of affective (and not only cognitive) language, grammar and pronunciation to the rise and vicissitudes of social institutions, in particular [484] of social classes. From sociolinguistics it is but a step to Vico's educational psychology. Harold Gardner, with commendable directness, turns his back on the historical speculation about sources and influences and intellectual traditions with which the bulk of Vico scholarship is preoccupied, to ask whether Vico's famous defence of the educational value of poetic Italian eloquence as against that of French *raison* – of the importance of developing children's imagination by literature and mythology before subjecting them to the desiccating effects of mathematics and logic and the rest of the medieval *quadrivium* – is in fact borne out by psychological evidence: in effect, whether Vico's thesis is true or false. He asks whether, for example, the researches of Chomsky and Piaget and Lévi-Strauss do or do not bear out the educational value of Renaissance and, indeed, pre-Renaissance humanistic studies – the *trivium*, as it were – as being better adapted to early mental development than the programmes of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and comes to the interesting conclusion that, while the methods defended by Vico may not be scientific, and so excite the scorn of positivist theorists of education, they may nevertheless be empirically justified, given our present state of knowledge about the physiology of the human brain, as shown by practical results.

From language to myth as a form of communication: in an outstanding essay, Gianfranco Cantelli has followed up his remarkable piece of research in his book *Vico e Bayle* by showing that the theory of myth held by Vico's famous correspondent, the protestant scholar and editor Jean Leclerc, is close to Vico's own in that he, too, thinks that myths are neither simply false statements about reality, nor corruptions of the truths of Scripture, nor (*pax* Athanasius Kircher) repositories of esoteric wisdom, but embody historical truths in mythical shells. Vico is at one with Leclerc in his

negative or critical views, but differs in positive interpretation: myths, for him, are indeed, like language, a method of communication: they embody, however, not 'facts' but the fantasies of primitives, and need a code (which he believes himself to have discovered) to penetrate them. Some of Cantelli's best pages connect this view with the hermetic theories of the Renaissance: if only Dame Frances Yates could be interested in turning her learning and imagination to this rich and relatively unploughed field. Cantelli's excellent account of Vico's intellectual and cultural milieu seems to me a good deal more balanced than Nicola Badaloni's admirably erudite but over-Marxist survey. So, too, Pietro Piovani has provided a very useful analysis of what is progressive and what is archaic in Vico's doctrine; without any overt polemical intent, he has provided a much-needed corrective to Giuseppe Giarrizzo's account of Vico's populism, which is overdone to the point of total implausibility – the features of the seventeenth-century anti-materialist Christian humanist, with his clerical milieu, are scarcely recognisable in the early proto-Marxist or crypto-radical celebrated by this school of historians.

There follows a series of comparisons of Vico's views with those of other thinkers. A great many parallels, both real and imaginary, had already been covered in Tagliacozzo's first collection in 1968; that more and more can be done along these lines is shown by the essays on Vico and Dilthey (Howard N. Tuttle), Vico and Kant (Nathan Rotenstreich), Vico and Husserl (Robert W. Jordan), Vico, Wundt and Max Weber (Maria Goretti), Vico and Wittgenstein (Emanuele Rivero), Vico and Piaget (George Mora) and Vico and Habermas (Angela [485] Maria Jacobelli). Such exercises in the 'contrast and compare' mode could, in theory, stretch to infinity; their value to authors under pressure to contribute to, for example, a Festschrift or a conference, is undeniable. Such juxtapositions are sometimes arresting, and we are none the poorer for them.

One of the most ingenious and striking essays in this genre is that of Attila Fáj on Vico's use of metonymy as a method of transition from genus to genus – for example, the leap from geometry to medicine, which he very skillfully compares with its use in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. The most important and illuminating contribution in this category seems to me to be that of Amos Funkenstein, who is concerned to contrast Vico's social theory with those of Hobbes and Spinoza. He begins with a lucid, learned and convincing account

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of the physical theories of both these thinkers, and their application of their scientific naturalism to politics. He examines Hobbes's and Spinoza's conception of man as a social engineer or artificer, who can make – create – and change institutions by deliberate action, and compares this with Vico's doctrine of historical growth, of society and of its political forms, as a process of development, as opposed to the state as a *Kunstwerk* (which, for example, Burckhardt attributed to the thought of the Italian Renaissance). Accordingly, Funkenstein draws a sharp contrast between the utilitarian doctrine of society, law and justice as arising out of fear or indigence, together with the pursuit of utility which he finds in Epicurus, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza and Bayle, as against Vico's theory, for which these factors are not so much causes as occasions for the development of social justice and the natural 'flowering' of human nature, conceived ideologically even though the imagination (whose work it is) may, as a matter of historical fact, have been aroused to its activity by the terror of the thundering sky, or hunger, or other types of immediate causal response to external nature experienced by the primitive *bestioni* of which Vico speaks. Imagination, he rightly maintains, is for Vico at once the creative faculty and the means, if used analytically, of reconstructing the history of past imaginings of which it is itself the organ. The problem of how Vico supposes we can 'enter into' or 'descend to' the life and experience of remote and savage ancestors is a notoriously difficult one. Funkenstein seems to me to come as near as anyone to elucidating Vico's doctrine of historical insight, even if the problem itself is not wholly solved; and he reasonably complains that neither J. G. A. Pocock nor Donald Kelley, in their discussions of historical method, mention Dilthey, whose views on this topic are certainly at least as relevant and important as those of Croce or Cassirer. So, too, Donald Phillip Verene, one of the co-editors of the volume, in a similar strain, develops with genuine skill and fine understanding the implications of the two functions of the imagination – creative and reconstructive – in Vico's theory. These two essays, which owe little to either Croce or M. H. Fisch, are original and important contributions to the interpretation of the theory of knowledge of the Neapolitan thinker – a theory conveyed in a series of elusive, tantalising, extraordinarily suggestive aperçus, masquerading as a fully developed systematic epistemology.

This brings me to the most disputed of all Vico's doctrines, that of the *storia ideale eterna* – the ordered, unalterable sequence of cultural phases in the cycles through which all human societies (with the exception of the Jews of the Old Testament) are destined to pass. For Funkenstein, these phases are not real historical periods, but limiting cases, heuristic fictions, like [486] Hobbes's State of Nature, or the concept of inertia in physics – ideal conditions which nations must go through unless external shocks, obstacles, accidents, or acts of will deflect the process, as they commonly do. Maria Goretti wonders about this, but comes to no clear conclusion. R. W. Jordan denies it: he takes Vico to believe in a divine guarantee of the historical reality of these stages, but his references to the text of the *Scienza nuova* (§§ 334, 336, 348–9) do not seem to me to support his argument; they show the 'ideal history' to be no more than a basic pattern of which (as Guido Sasso plausibly maintains) the development of law may be Vico's central paradigm, and consequently not a genuine scientific hypothesis, but an idealised neo-Platonic vision of the workings, under the guidance of a creative Providence, of man's own self-creative, self-transforming powers. It is this attribute, moreover, that enables him to retrace his own steps – a quasi-divine pleasure, as Vico calls it, inasmuch as all creation that is conscious of itself is *eo ipso* participation in God's creative activity. It was doubtless this metaphysical vision that so deeply fascinated Coleridge – a theme which Vittorio Mathieu develops.

This brings me to the three most critical pieces in this collection, those of W. H. Walsh, Leon Pompa and Alain Pons. According to Vico (as Goretti reminds us), man is transformed not by blind impersonal forces but by his own efforts, his own ever-creative imagination embodied in concrete institutional forms – social, economic, legal, religious, artistic – according to a fixed, unalterable pattern of development. How do we discover this pattern? And what part, if any, does Providence play in this process of self-humanisation? In an admirably lucid, detailed, carefully argued essay, Walsh questions the logical status of Vico's knowledge of the Ideal Eternal History. How do we know it? By what kind of 'empathy'? How can we be so sure of the motives and goals of the savage primitives, so remote from our own world? And even if we acquire some mysterious means of penetrating their minds, how can we come to know the unintended consequences of their acts? Walsh thinks that Vico conceived of an ideal model of a possible historical

development, a pattern that was to be checked by the evidence of empirically observed and remembered facts, and to be modified in the light of these; the deduced consequences of the modified model were in their turn to be checked by the facts again, and the new implications were once more to be submitted to empirical tests – and so, by this successive interplay between hypothesis and factual data, the three stages of human development would be established.

This, if I understand Walsh correctly, is very similar to the hypothetico-deductive method of, say, Karl Popper: since there is no magical insight into the past to give us indubitable knowledge that, let us say, the Flood occurred or that the first men were sexually promiscuous. For if the links between historical events are not to be established by ordinary scientific reasoning, how can they be? If Vico's ideal pattern is not, in the end, some kind of empirical hypothesis which can be falsified or at least weakened by negative instances (which Vico never offers), what is it? Surely not a self-certifying metaphysical doctrine independent of all experience? Vico's appeal to 'philology', to *certum*, to normal human experience, seems to rule this out; the ideal pattern may, Walsh suggests, like those of Hegel, Marx, Spengler, do no more than order the facts, lead to insights, cause the facts to be seen in a new light – but they are not instruments of discovery, not directly intuited a priori truths.

So, too, Leon [487] Pompa asks: What is a priori and what is empirical in Vico? Even if the *bestioni* 'made' their history, does this entail that we know it as we know the differential calculus, which, since it is man-made, any man can reconstruct in his own mind? In what sense can men be said to 'make' history? Pompa maintains that all that Vico tells us is only that, because we, too, are men, we can know what other men have made, not that we do know it; to have 'made' our experience is at most a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition of historical knowledge. He goes beyond Walsh in holding that Vico is committed to seeing the facts themselves through the spectacles of the pattern of the Ideal History, and that he has therefore precluded himself from any independent source of the empirical – factual – knowledge which he needs to give plausibility to his novel reconstruction of the past.

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These wholly reasonable arguments⁸ (rejected as they might be by an out-and-out Idealist or Romantic) are valid for anyone who accepts the realist basis of the natural sciences. So are a good many other points made by both Walsh and Pompa, which I have not space to mention. But it seems to me that they miss an essential point. Vico may have supposed himself to have provided a new method of discovery of hitherto unknown empirical facts – his language at times suggests this. Against this claim, the objections urged by Walsh and Pompa are, I believe, valid. Pompa, who takes the term *scienza* seriously in its modern sense, has done his best to fit Vico into the main current of European rationalism by giving him the benefit of every reasonable doubt; but this attempt, ingenious and gallant as it is, seems to me misdirected.

Vico's cardinal claim to be considered an innovator of genius does not rest on any suggestion he makes of how we are logically to justify propositions about the past. It is an error to look upon him as a rival of Mill or Popper or Hempel or Dray. If he were only, or principally, occupied with the logic of the social sciences, or even with providing yet another cyclical theory of history, the oblivion into which he fell would not have been wholly undeserved. But his major achievement was surely something different: an attempt to develop a theory of what it is to understand the development of mankind; to understand history as action perceived by the actors – ways in which men interpret and thereby change their world – which is for him, no less than for Hegel, a single process. To speak of this as showing the facts in a new light is not enough, for thereby the facts themselves (certainly what is to count as a particularly significant fact) are transformed. Long before Marc Bloch or Lucien Febvre, Vico revolted against the view of history as a mere succession of happenings – *évenementielle* – the view which underlies the concept of a history both of the classical historians of antiquity (save only Herodotus) and of their Renaissance disciples, men who saw history as so many casual sequences in which men were so many objects in nature, driven hither and thither by fate, by their own passions, by forces physical or psychological, and of which, consequently, a natural science was in principle possible.

⁸ See the list of objections to Vico's doctrine given in Bruce Mazlish, *The Riddle of History: The Graet Speculators from Vico to Freud* (New York, 1966), 49–52.

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Vico does not wish to call into question the critical methods of establishing the events and facts of the past employed by the best historians, scholars, antiquarians in his day, something at which Thucydides or the Bollandists or his friend Muratori were plainly better than the medieval chroniclers. But he differs [488] from them in the type of facts which he selects as significant: man's history for Vico is indeed a succession, but a succession of collective outlooks and conduct, of patterns of communal activity and response, which convey and embody images of the world and motives and goals – the story of the perpetual striving by men to maintain or transform relationships among themselves and with circumambient nature – an endless process enshrined in symbols, written and spoken, articulated in institutional life and every form of expressive behaviour, which can be decoded by posterity. Hence his emphasis on what the ordinary historians of his (and our) day tend to leave out – means of collective self-expression: ritual, art, language, gestures, myth, social custom, law, above all the entire affective life of men, the *mentalité* of social groups, which for him, far more even than for Voltaire (who did not, as a historian, practice what he preached), form the substance of man's experience on earth, in contrast with the 'external' history of battles, treaties, great men and political records, even if it is reduced to Lenin's celebrated formula 'Who whom?'

The gifts needed for the understanding of the symbols and institutions through which men at various levels of consciousness express what they think and feel and do, without enquiring about the truth or falsity of these beliefs, seem more akin to those of the novelist or poet than to those of an accountant or statistician, or even of the kind of biographer that Plutarch or Machiavelli, or, indeed, Vico himself, when executing commissions for important patrons, turned out to be. Vico is, above all, the pioneer of the tradition of cultural history, of the *Geistesgeschichte* of which Herder and Boeckh, Burckhardt and Fustel de Coulanges, Huizinga and Gilbert Murray are exemplars, of those who, like Odysseus, seek to resurrect the dead by offering them the blood of the living, an uncertain and sometimes desperate endeavor of which Wilamowitz spoke in his characteristically brilliant, moving and sceptical inaugural lecture. It is this that most of those who have written perceptively on Vico have found in him. The contributions of, for

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example, Peter Hughes and Ernesto Grassi seem to me typical and imaginative examples of this approach.

This view is precisely what Alain Pons, in his original, learned, excellently written and searching essay, is concerned to deny. For him, Vico is, above all, concerned with practice (and in this connection he quotes the newly translated *Pratica*, as well as the recommendations in *De nostri*) – that is, Vico's main purpose, in his view, is not (unlike that of Galileo or Hobbes) to explain or to achieve the reasonable attitude of a prudent man (Aristotle's goal, since infallible knowledge – *episteme* – is not attainable in practical matters), but to guide the societies of men back to the acme of development from which they may have fallen. I can only say that others may discern an ambition in Vico to lead men to new heights: this insight is withheld from me. Of course Vico, like all men, displays some political preferences and biases; but nothing in his text seems to me directly to advocate practical policies. I am, however, not expert (I admit) at reading between the lines. No doubt Vico did think that his treatise, by illuminating the course of the self-transformation of humanity, contributed to political wisdom – virtually all historians before Ranke thought of themselves as doing this, and many doubtless think it still. But it is one thing to believe in the lessons of history – history as a collection of *exempla* – another to look on it as essentially action-directed. Vico the companion, or even the forerunner, of Lenin and Gramsci seems to me as implausible as Vico the anticipator of Popper; [489] the political, radical Vico of Badaloni, Giarrizzo and Pons seems to me as unreal as the passive, detached, apolitical contemplative of Hannah Arendt (which Alain Pons rightly rejects out of hand).

To have seen something that no one else had seen, a new vision of human development, of the nature of men and societies, to ask for the first time, and give an answer to, the question of what it is to understand entire cultures in all their manifestations, their rise and fall and supersession – indeed, the contribution of the novel concept of each individual culture as only one among others – this is indeed to have taken a revolutionary step. This volume, like its predecessors *Omaggio a Vico*⁹ and the *International Symposium* of 1958, wherever it may lead us, bears witness to the continuing vitality of a

⁹ Antonio Corsano and others, *Omaggio a Vico* (Naples, 1968).

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world of thought of which Vico was the pioneer; indeed, if his successors had realised it, the true and only begetter.

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