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Professor Scouten on Herder and Vico

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I MUST OWN that I read Professor Arthur H. Scouten's review¹ of my book *Vico and Herder* with mounting amazement. In the first place it is not, in the normal sense, a review at all, since it is wholly confined to one single issue – the resemblance between the central ideas contained in Herder's writings of the 1770s and those of Giambattista Vico, which occupies a very few pages of my book. This issue is, of course, a celebrated crux, much discussed in the literature. It is so because Herder does not so much as mention Vico until 1797, whereas the striking parallels occur more than twenty years before; nor does the mention of 1797 indicate the extent of the similarities between some of Herder's most important theses and those of the Italian thinker.

Professor Scouten says that the puzzle rests on two fallacious assumptions:

(1) that 'If Herder knew Vico's work, he would have mentioned his name'.² Unlike Professor Scouten, I do regard this as a valid, if inconclusive, argument. Since Herder, who was generous in mentioning thinkers whom he admired, did mention Vico in 1797,

¹ *Comparative Literature Studies* 15 no. 3 (September 1978), 336–41.

² 336.

there is no reason to think that he would have deliberately refrained from doing so in 1773, in *Auch eine Philosophie*, if he had read him by then.

(2) that the problem still exists despite the fact that it ‘was solved by the late Robert T. Clark thirty years ago’³ in his article, well known to specialists, correctly described by Erich Auerbach in 1959 as an important discovery.⁴ The discovery was that Herder knew, since he recommended it to others, the [translation of and] commentary on Ossian by the Italian Jesuit Father Melchiorre Cesarotti, first published in 1763,⁵ the German translation of which in 1768 by Father Michael Denis⁶ had been sent to him for review by Nicolai. Cesarotti was a follower of Vico and quoted him by name. Clark’s argument for supposing that Herder was familiar with Cesarotti’s Vico-inspired commentaries, and that he had been influenced by them, seems to me perfectly valid, and Auerbach’s tribute to his discovery to be perfectly just. My failure to acknowledge this, Professor Scouten tells your readers, must be due to the fact that I seem ‘unaware of the discovery’ (337).

This really will not do. If Professor Scouten (and the battery of scholars whom he thanks for ‘their extensive help in verifying de-[142]tails in this review’) had bothered to do no more than look at the index of my book, he (and they) would have discovered that I mention the Cesarotti hypothesis more than once (75n2 [on 76], 90, 147, 150).⁷ I refer specifically to this hypothesis⁸ in footnote 2 to

³ *ibid.*, referring to Robert T. Clark, ‘Herder, Cesarotti and Vico’, *Studies in Philology* 44 no. 4 (October 1947), 645–71.

⁴ Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York, 1959), 188.

⁵ *Poesie di Ossian, figlio di Fingal, antico poeta Celtico, ultimamente scoperte, e tradotte in prosa Inglese da Jacopo Macpherson, e da quella trasportate in verso Italiano dall’ Ab. Melchior Cesarotti, con varie annotazioni de’ due traduttori* (Padua, 1763).

⁶ *Die Gedichte Ossians, eines alten celtischen Dichters*, trans. M[ichael] Denis, vol. 1 (Vienna, 1768). For Vico see 35n(d), 61n1.

⁷ [In the revised edition of *Vico and Herder in Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (TCE) these passages are to be found at 120n2 (on 121), 139, 211, 215.]

⁸ To add two footnotes to the second paragraph of my footnote 2 to p. 75 (on p. 76 [TCE 121]), if only to please Professor Scouten, who is a keen defender of the importance of footnotes, I must plead guilty to an omission and a slip. My text contains no bibliography, and a very minimum of references to secondary sources; nevertheless, it would have been more generous to mention Professor R. T. Clark as the sole begetter of the Cesarotti hypothesis, long familiar to all

p. 75 [on p. 76], where I say ‘It is difficult to believe [...] that the sole link between Vico and the early Herder [...] is Vico’s disciple Cesarotti [...]. Yet it may well be the case: there is as yet little evidence worthy of the name for any other conclusion. The effect of one thinker upon others is, at times, anything but direct.’ In other words, I declare myself ready to accept the Cesarotti hypothesis provisionally, until more decisive evidence turns up.

As if this were not enough to clear me of Professor Scouten’s charge of crass ignorance, let me cite the words I use about Herder’s possible debts and ‘echoes’: ‘Certainly Cesarotti had perceived the wider implications of this kind of approach to literature [i.e. parallels between the poetry of different primitive peoples] for comparative philology and anthropology’ (150 [TCE 215]). Furthermore, I mention Cesarotti among those who spread knowledge of Vico’s theses (90 [TCE 139]). Surely this is sufficient acknowledgement of Cesarotti’s role? What I cannot do is accept Professor Scouten’s assertion that Robert Clark has solved the problem, even though the great authority of Erich Auerbach, if nothing else, should, in Professor Scouten’s view, have shamed me into doing so. I cannot do this for one simple but sufficient reason: that the parallels between Herder and Vico seem to me to go well beyond anything that Cesarotti had supplied. Let me examine some of the parallels advanced by my critic.

His first example (337) – the hypothesis of the animism of early cultures – while it originates before Vico, is a valid parallel; so is the notion that poetry precedes prose, as is admiration of both for the beauties of primitive song. But this is virtually the whole of Herder’s putative debt to Cesarotti. For (a) neither Herder, nor Cesarotti in his aesthetic writings, are in fact committed to the view that everything modern is necessarily decadent; (b) the conception of the organic nature of cultures is one which Herder could, and probably did, derive wholly from Hamann, whose views he revered; in any case, the notion is there, in some form, in both Hooker and Pascal.

those interested in this issue. I do, of course, acknowledge the debt which all students of Herder owe to Clark’s magnificent biography. In the same footnote I speak of Cesarotti’s commentary on Homer instead of Ossian (as also on p. 147, line 17 [TCE 211, line 12]); the confusion between Cesarotti’s commentaries is a lapse which Professor Scouten, if he noticed it, was too courteous to point out. I propose to return his kindness by omitting, in my turn, to point to a similar (equally trivial and accidental, I feel sure) solecism of his own.

As for relativism: whatever Cesarotti's position may be, it is not clear to me that either Vico or Herder were relativists in any genuine sense. Recognition of a plurality of not necessarily compatible values is not the same thing as relativism; and this goes back to at least the sixteenth century; but this is not the place for discussing that large and difficult subject.

What above all I cannot find in Cesarotti's commentaries – perhaps Professor Scouten has sharper eyes – is the central factor, the *idée maîtresse* of both Vico and Herder: the distinction between the methods of the natural sciences and those of the hu[143]manities; the contrast between the rationalist materialism of some of the leading thinkers of the French Enlightenment on the one hand, and, on the other, the central role ascribed by Vico to *fantasia* and by Herder to *das Einfühlen*⁹ – between the knowledge which is the instrument and goal of the quantitative sciences, and the understanding, or *Verstehen*, of what Herder calls the *Eigenheit*, the unique character, of a culture or of a process of social development, and, in particular, of the interplay between the conscious and the senseless factors in the life and growth of human societies and communities; or, finally, any discussion of the temptations and dangers of anachronistic interpretations of the past and the importance of a sense of 'period'.

I can find none of this in Cesarotti: but there is something of it in the writings of such contemporary Swiss critics as Bodmer, Breitinger, von Muralt.¹⁰ I should like to suggest that an investigation of the correspondence of Count Calepio, a devoted Vichian, with Bodmer may be as valuable for discovering a bridge between Vico and his German-speaking successors as the solution offered by the late Professor Clark. No modern student of Herder doubts that Cesarotti's commentaries were known to him, or that some Vichian ideas may have found their way to Herder in this way; but this accounts for too small a part of the striking similarity

⁹ [So far as I can tell, Herder never uses this exact term. But he certainly deploys the concept in other words, e.g. *bineinfühlen*, *mitfühlen*. See e.g. *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit: Beytrag zu vielen Beyträgen des Jahrhunderts* ([Riga], 1774), section 1: *Herders sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan and others (Berlin, 1877–1913), v 502–3. See J. G. Herder on *Social and Political Culture*, trans. and ed. F. M. Barnard (Cambridge, 1969), 181–2; and TCE 244/1. Ed.]

¹⁰ And, of course, in the preceding century, and, indeed, before it.

between their ideas. One can only hope that some adequately equipped scholar will throw light on the Vico–Calepio–Bodmer–Herder connection.

Professor Scouten, furthermore, takes me to task for saying that ‘Herder was, all his life, a sharp and remorseless critic of the Encyclopedists’ (146 [TCE 210]), and remarks that, having accepted their doctrines earlier, he became an opponent only in 1769. Neither part of this assertion is accurate. I need only refer your readers to the rest of my sentence, which goes on as follows: ‘but he accepted, indeed he acclaimed, the scientific theories on which they based their social and ethical doctrines’; after which [TCE 210/1] I refer the reader to two excellent books on Herder and the natural sciences. I go on to describe Herder as ‘decisively influenced by the findings of natural science’, to which he gives a vitalistic twist (150 [TCE 214]), although on this, as on other issues, he is often inconsistent (213–14 [TCE 296–7]). So much for this particular charge.

To return to Cesarotti: Professor Scouten cites a quotation from him (in a German translation) by Robert Mayo: ‘Jedes Volk hat seine Religion, seine Gesetze, Sitten, Meynungen, Gebräuche, seinen Wahn. Wer in diesem Chaos Grundsätze, Zusammenhang, Vernunft suchen wollte, würde sich sehr irren’,¹¹ and adds: ‘These views are pure Vico, of course’ (339). This is a strange comment. To confute it I need go no further than Herder himself, who described Vico in 1797, quite correctly, as doing precisely what Cesarotti (as the words cited [144] by Mayo show) evidently thought absurd, namely ‘looking for the common principles [*gemeinschaftliche Grundsätze*] of physics, ethics, law, the Law of Nations [...]; [...] for the principle of the *humanity* of nations (*dell’umanità delle nazioni*), which

¹¹ [Robert S. Mayo, *Herder and the Beginnings of Comparative Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1969), 101. Cesarotti’s original text, ‘Ragionamento sopra l’ origine e il progressi dell’ arte poetica’, was published in *Il Cesare, e il Maometto: tragedie del signor di Voltaire trasportate in versi italiani, con alcuni ragionamenti del traduttore* (Venice, 1762). This passage (at 237) may be rendered: ‘Every people has its religion, laws, customs, opinions, usages and follies. Anyone looking for principles, system, reasonableness in this chaos would be greatly deceived.’ The German translation Mayo cites is by Johann Nicolaus Meinhardt: ‘Abhandlung des Herrn Cesarotti über den Ursprung und Fortgang der Poesie’, *Neue Bibliothek der schönen wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* 2 no. 1 (1766), 1–54 at 15.]

he found in *providence* (*provvedenza*) and *wisdom*'.¹² No one who has read Vico, even superficially, can doubt that he supposed that he had found a universal law by which the cycles of social development were rigorously determined – the *corsi e ricorsi* which each 'gentile' nation must inevitably traverse. Nor is there anything in Vico about the different *Eigenheiten* of *Völker*: only about the stages of one universally observable cultural process. Herder did not owe his doctrine of nationalities to Vico; he may have owed it to some degree to Hamann or, for all I know, to Cesarotti, with whose full output I cannot claim to be acquainted, but not to Vico. I fear that Cesarotti has, once again, let Professor Scouten down.

One final point: the circumstances of Michelet's discovery of the *Scienza nuova*. On this, Professor Scouten quotes Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station*, and says (339) 'Professor Berlin seems unaware of Wilson's book, now generally considered a classic.' I do think that Professor Scouten might have given me the benefit of the doubt. After all, it is intrinsically unlikely that any British or American student of the philosophy of history does not know the opening sentence of Wilson's most famous book. It may be of some minor biographical interest to know that I had several arguments with the late Edmund Wilson about some of the theses in his book. I like to think that I had some hand in persuading him about two of these, which are indeed revised in the introduction which he added to the paperback edition of 1972. But on his story of Michelet and the endnote in Buchon's version of Dugald Stewart¹³ he remained obdurate. His reading of Michelet's *Journal* after the war convinced him, so he told me, that Michelet did not always tell the truth, and that Gabriel Monod, his biographer, may have trusted him too devoutly; but he could not be certain of this; and therefore would not accept my view, based on the excellent Introduction to Vico's

¹² *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*, tenth collection, letter 115, editor's post-script: *Herder's sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan and others (Berlin, 1877–1913), xviii 246; see also my book, p. 91 [TCE 141].

¹³ [Dugald Stewart, *Histoire abrégée des sciences métaphysiques, morales et politiques, depuis la renaissance des lettres* (original title: *A General View of the Progress of Metaphysical, Ethical, and Political Philosophy since the Revival of Letters in Europe*), trans. and with an introduction by J[ean]-A[lexandre] Buchon, 3 vols (Paris, 1820–3), iii 369–72 (note L to 120: principally a quotation of most of Francesco Saviero Salfi, 'Histoire idéale de Vico', endnote 7 to p. liii of *Éloge de Gaetano Filangieri*, in *Œuvres de Filangieri*, [trans. Jean Antoine Gauvain Gallois], 6 vols (Paris, 1822–4), vol. 1, i–cxxxviii at cv–cvii.)

autobiography by Professor Harold Fisch (to which Professor Scouten himself refers),¹⁴ that, but for Cousin's own piece in Buchon,¹⁵ he might not have sought to meet either Salfi or Cousin, who, in his turn, introduced him to de Angelis, who gave him the *Scienza nuova* to read when he learnt Italian; and that consequently his own denial of the part played by Cousin was not necessarily to be entirely trusted.

I find it difficult to believe that the endnote in Buchon was of itself enough to have caused Michelet to learn Italian, and think that Cousin's claim in this case deserves at least as much respect as Michelet's denial of it. But having failed to convert Edmund Wilson to my view (about which in [145] any case I do not feel too certain), I shall not attempt to persuade Professor Scouten or your readers of it; it is not a point of great importance. My sole purpose in this long rejoinder is to clear myself of a truly astonishing charge of culpable ignorance of the best-known hypothesis about the Herder–Vico problem, and, only incidentally, of the circumstances of Michelet's discovery of the *New Science*.

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¹⁴ 339n18.

¹⁵ [Victor Cousin, 'Analyse d'un ouvrage de M. Dugald Stewart, intitulé *Esquisse de philosophie morale*', *Histoire abrégée* (previous note) iii 240–300, originally published as a four-part article on the third edition of Stewart's *Outlines of Moral Philosophy: For the Use of Students in the University of Edinburgh* (1st ed, Edinburgh, 1793), *Journal des savans*: January 1817, 3–12; June 1817, 334–42; July 1817, 413–18; August 1817, 485–93.]