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VICO'S *DE NOSTRI TEMPORIS STUDIORUM* RATIONE AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH THOUGHT

DEBORAH KIER BIRNS

In the meagre collection of non-Italian references to Vico which appear prior to the first translation of his masterpiece, the *Scienza Nuova*, in 1948, he is mentioned characteristically as a mystic precursor of the Romantic movement. C.E. Vaughan's 1921 address on the then unknown Vico and his *Scienza Nuova* is typical: Vico, he told his audience, was "the first to herald the great poetic revival of the eighteenth century: the first to demand that Poetry should be released from the gilded cage in which Pope and Boileau had imprisoned her."¹ But there is more to Vico than his theories of poetic imagination, childhood fancy, and cultural evolution which scholars have singled out for their impact upon Coleridge, Rousseau, and Herder. And there is far more to Vico's writings than the *Scienza Nuova*. In a recently published collection from a symposium honoring Vico's tercentenary (1668-1968), historians, philosophers, anthropologists, educators, linguists, sociologists, poets, and critics from both sides of the Atlantic expand their studies of Vico to include his Latin works, his sources, and the broad arc of his influence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Where they detect no direct Vichian influence, these scholars trace the remarkable parallels between Vico's visionary philosophy and that of later thinkers. If Vico has never had a well-defined place in the history of ideas it is not, Giorgio Tagliacozzo assures us, because of the obscurity of his writings, but because "Vico's thought embraced too

many different aspects of too many cultural epochs, presupposed the simultaneous dissolution of too many traditions and commonplaces, and represented too original a synthesis to gain a hold at the time of its formation and immediately thereafter."²

Despite the breadth and depth of the *Symposium's* articles, there remains a surprising tendency to extract Vico from his own time and to view his thoughts merely as precursors of later writings. Without denying that Vico's "original synthesis" dissolved many eighteenth-century "traditions and commonplaces," we must also view him as a man of his own time who shared the "traditional" and "untraditional" thoughts of other eighteenth-century writers. Although Rene Wellek alone in the *Symposium* deals with Vico in his own period, the thrust of his essay is not to make connections, but to deny that anyone "in the eighteenth century, least of all in Great Britain, absorbed or even discussed ...Vico's stupendous theme of history."³ Wellek does, however, suggest that cultural convergence in the eighteenth century may explain the ubiquity of "Vichian" ideas. To understand Vico as a man of his own time and to place him in relation to eighteenth-century England, we must see that he expresses many ideas considered by his English contemporaries, as well as vice versa. After all, Vico, too, had read the Latin works of many great seventeenth-century English thinkers — Bacon, Hobbes, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, Stanley, Selden, and Dempster among them — and had been moved by them.⁴ It is thus very likely that the cultural and philosophical attitudes driving eighteenth century Englishmen to evolve (to borrow Kuhn's term) a "paradigm shift" were also working on Vico through the same sources.

Vico's *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (*On the Study Methods of Our Time*) was delivered as an address to the students at the University of Naples in 1708, and published in 1709. It was not translated into English until 1965; its "non-Italian bibliography [is] practically non-existent."⁵ Yet the *De ratione* is considered by the doyen of Vico studies to be "the most important pedagogic essay between Locke's *Thoughts on Education* (1693) and the *Emile* (1762) of Rousseau."⁶ Moreover, its focus on the famous "Querelles des Anciens et des Modernes" in seventeenth and eighteenth-century England, France, and Italy places Vico well within the concerns of his own time, and therefore provides us with a valuable comparison of Vico's ideas and those of his English contemporaries.

While in the France of Boileau and Perrault the "Querelle" was an exclusively literary one, in England, as R.F. Jones amply demonstrates, it embraced, and centered on, Baconian experimental science.⁷ By the time Swift wrote *A Tale of a Tub* and the *Battle of Books* (circa 1696), the controversy had been largely settled in England in favor of modern science.⁸ Nevertheless stirrings were still heard and in 1690 Swift's patron, Sir William Temple, published a defense of the superiority of ancient philosophy and science in his *Essay upon the Ancient and Modern Learning*. The small flurry caused by Temple's *Essay* and Wotton's response to him in *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694) reawakened the debate that had occurred between the Royal Society and its attackers following the publication of Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* in 1667. When Bentley and Boyle joined opposite sides of the renewed fray, Swift armed his pen with satiric barbs and began to write the *Tale* and the *Battle*. From Dennis's *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* in 1701 through Johnson's observations late in the eighteenth-century, English writers continued to debate the merits of the Ancients and Moderns in learning and poetic inspiration.

Vico, like Swift, wrote in response to a strong modernist sentiment in the Italian intellectual community, Cartesianism dominated philosophical methodology and Vico felt compelled, as a professor of rhetoric, to defend the classical humanities from the radical anti-historicism and depreciation of language and literature that came in Descartes's wake. Although Vico was utterly devoted to Baconian science, the Englishman's antitraditionalism displeased him; he felt "implicit in it a rejection of the heritage of that humanism...so dear to his heart."⁹ But there is much of the modern in Vico too. In the *De ratione* he opens the debate between Ancients and Moderns beyond "humanitas versus science" to embrace psychology, literature, eloquence, mathematics, and the way we study them. He admits from the outset that the Moderns' study methods "seem, beyond any doubt, better and more correct than those of the Ancients."¹⁰ But rather than align himself wholly with one camp or the other, as did his Italian predecessors and most other writers of the period, Vico understood the reciprocity of ancient and modern learning, and culled from each the best it had to offer.

If Vico and Swift come to widely differing conclusions about the nature of man's learning and imagination, nevertheless they base their objections to modernism on a strikingly similar premise: both write as adversaries to any abstract intellectual schema "which forces tumultuous, contradictory human nature into the straight jacket of an absolute truth, of a truth excogitated, dreamt of, but never to be met with in reality."¹¹ Vico opens the *De ratione* with a skeptical assessment of man's ability to know anything absolutely: "all that man is given to know is, like man himself, limited and imperfect" (DR, p. 35). Like Swift, Vico never dismisses this sense of man's limitations for long. Time and again he reminds us that men "are, for the most part, but fools...ruled, not by forethought, but by whim or chance" (DR, p. 4); that "Nature and life are full of incertitude" (DR, p. 15). Small wonder, then, that the Cartesian notion of "clear and distinct ideas" is repugnant to the Vichian mind. Vico does not quarrel with advances in modern chemistry, anatomy, pharmacology, geography, or mechanics; these are benefits of the Moderns' superior insight and "complementary aids."¹² But for "the instruments with which modern science operate[s]" (DR, p. 12), that is, for strictly deductive syllogistic reasoning, Vico has no praise. Descartes's philosophical criticism is "jejune and aridly deductive" (DR, p. 17); it stifles the growth of common sense by preventing judgments based on verisimilitude. And this inability to reason from verisimilitude and probability threatens Vico's own field: he perceives

a danger that instruction in advanced philosophical criticism may lead to an abnormal growth of abstract intellectualism, and render young people unfit for the practice of eloquence...Satisfied with abstract truth alone, and not being gifted with common sense, these [Cartesian] doctrinaires do not bother to find out whether their opinion is held by the generality and whether the things that are truths to them are also true to other people.

(DR, pp. 13, 35)

Vico believes that the Ancients avoided undue and premature emphasis on abstract reasoning by teaching their youths to argue from set topics rather than from analytical geometry. They thus nurtured memory and imagination in their adolescents "without doing violence to nature, but gradually and gently and in step with the mental

capacities of their age" (DR, p. 14). Personal conviction and simple eloquence are, for Vico, the only persuasive tools of argument because they are derived from contact with and experience of reality. Moving outward from the sphere of rhetoric, Vico argues that scientific research and Galen-styled medical treatment based solely on speculation will result only in sunken dreams and dead patients. The Cartesian method in the *De ratione* is, finally, "a divinatory art, an activity to be placed next to witchcraft."¹³

It is a short but significant jump from Vico's veiled attacks on Descartes and his mild humor at the expense of Perot's sunken ship to Swift's satiric excoriation of Descartes in *A Tale of a Tub*. In the *Tale's* "Digression Concerning Madness" Swift attacks his favorite bugbear, the "system." "Monsieur Des Cartes," like Alexander the Great and Jack of Leyden, receives Swift's wrath as a system-builder — a destroyer of common sense and a promulgator of cant. Like Vico, Swift is deeply suspicious of abstract reasoning, but where the Italian likens it to "witchcraft," Swift reduces it to utter madness:

...madness [has] been the parent of all those mighty revolutions that have happened in empire, in philosophy, and in religion. For the brain, in its natural position and state of serenity, disposeth its owner to pass his life in the common forms, without any thought of subduing multitudes to his own power, his reasons, or his visions...But when a man's fancy gets astride on his reason, when imagination is at cuffs with the senses, and common understanding, as well as common sense, is kicked out of doors, the first proselyte he makes is himself...¹⁴

Swift finally dispatches Descartes altogether in the *Battle of Books* when Aristotle's lance finds "a defect" in the Frenchman's "head-piece."¹⁵

In Swift's vision, imagination and memory are no longer the creative gifts of youth to be nurtured into eloquence and poetic genius, but the instruments of delusion. Where for Vico abstract speculation leads to dullness and falsehood, for Swift it induces the cosmic chaos of "A Digression Concerning Madness" and Gulliver's third voyage. In the kingdom of the Whore, Laputa, Gulliver finds men "so taken up with intense speculations, that they neither can speak, nor attend to the discourse of others, without being roused by some external taction upon the organs of speech and hearing."¹⁶ Their houses are ill con-

structed, they can neither converse with Gulliver nor provide him with a decent suit of clothes, they live in constant apprehension of the heavens, and their wives universally cheat on them — when a stranger is available. In short, Swift presents a comic picture of a kingdom so discommoded by its lofty speculations that its male citizenry cannot even manage the fundamental act of fornication. At heart, both Swift and Vico are utilitarians; for both, science should confine itself to the concrete and the useful. Where Vico presents a single example of a failed experiment based on speculative reasoning, Swift's hypertrophied fancy runs amuck. He brings Gulliver to the Grand Academy of Projectors in Lagado, capital of Balnibarbi. Thinly-veiled parodies of the Royal Society's "virtuosi," the Grand Academicians of Lagado expend their energies speculating on multifarious ways to improve society. "The only inconvenience is," Gulliver reports, "that none of these projects are yet brought to perfection, and in the mean time the whole country lies miserably waste, the houses in ruins, and the people without food or clothes."¹⁷

As defenders of humanism's most authentic and durable values, both Swift and Vico turn in disgust from the Moderns' propensity to create elaborate and useless systems of abstract thought. But where, in the *Battle of Books*, Swift finally dismisses all the Moderns save Bacon as followers of Ridicule, Dullness, Ill Manners, and Criticism, Vico, a Baconian after all, shares many of their attitudes and sympathies. In their mutual devotion to common sense reality Vico and Swift paradoxically part company. For where Swift views imagination not as the "womb," but the "grave" of common sense,¹⁸ not as the source, but the devourer of truth, Vico considers the distinction between reason and fancy to be a false one. In eschewing Descartes, Vico realizes that man cannot aspire to Houyhnhnm-like sheer rationality without denying himself as an integrality of reason, fancy, passion, and emotion. Each stage of man's development, as each stage in the development of civilization, has its characteristic strengths. Vico needs neither Rousseau nor Herder to convince him that youth is "powerful in imagination" which "should in no way be dulled" (DR, pp. 13-14). Remo Fornaco, in his study of Vico's educational thought, explains that "per il Vico...ogni eta ha un suo particolare modo di vedere e vivere la realta, il che vuol dire che sarebbe un grave errore pedagogico credere che il

mondo e le cose assumano la stessa fisionomia per il fanciullo e per l'adulto."¹⁹ In other words, Vico accepts the relativity of perception and therefore defends that imaginative part of man which enables him to create his own reality. Vico the sociologist, Vico the psychologist, leaves Swift in another dimension. His views on poetic genius in chapter VIII of the *De ratione* recall Dennis, Young, and Johnson rather than the good Dean.

In spirit, John Dennis's *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* of 1701, is not far from Vico's *De ratione*. Both men, after all, introduce the famous "Querelle" in order "to set the Moderns upon an equal foot with even admired Antiquity."²⁰ By learning from the Ancients, Vico assures his students, they will remedy their inferiorities and enrich the modern age. Inspired by Longinus's *Peri Hupsous*, Dennis argues for emotion, passion, and "enthusiasm" in poetry rather than restraint and adherence to formal rules. The prime impetus for this enthusiasm is "the Christian religion" (TFW, p. 469). Vico, although he couches his beliefs in more secular terms, also locates the sublime in poetic expression and calls on poets to "keep their eyes fixed on an ideal truth." (DR, p. 42). The aged Edward Young, in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* of 1759, seems to be the last Englishman to address himself directly to the old debate. His attitudes toward the effects of ancient literature on the Moderns exactly parallel Vico's. Vico demands:

What if I declared that the most outstanding masterpieces of the arts hinder rather than help students in the field? It may be surprising, but nevertheless it is true...Those who are endowed with surpassing genius should put the masterworks of their art out of their sight, and strive with the greatest to appropriate the secret of nature's grandest creations.

(DR, pp. 71-72)

Young, in turn, asserts that "illustrious Examples engross, prejudice, and intimidate...when we write, let our Judgment shut them out of our Thoughts" (TFW, p. 874). Vico contends that "since imitators cannot surpass or even equal the innovators, they can only fall short of their achievement" (DR, p. 71). Similarly, Young tells us that "Imitators only give us a sort of Duplicate of what we had, possibly much better, before" (TFW, p. 872). Young speaks for both of them when, with a

radical distillation of his treatise, he declares, "Imitation is inferiority confessed" (TFW, p. 881). Vico concurs with Young's assertion that although "the modern powers are equal of those before them, modern performance in general is deplorably short" (TFW, p. 878). Both writers thus hope to remedy the deficiencies of their times by exhorting their readers to use the beauties and defects of the Ancients as a "chart to conduct, and a sure helm to steer us in our passage to greater Perfection than Theirs" (TFW, p. 875).

Samuel Johnson agrees with Dennis's and Young's critical attitudes toward the Ancients, but goes far beyond them. Of all English poets in the eighteenth century, he seems to come closest to Vico's conceptions of poetry's function, method, and sources. And like Vico, he is a brilliant neo-classicist in search of a new paradigm to take him beyond the limits of neo-classicism. Vico laments in the *De ratione* that

the greatest drawback of our education method is that we pay an excessive amount of attention to the natural sciences and not enough to ethics. Our chief fault is that we disregard that part of ethics which treats of human character, of its dispositions, its passions, and the manner of adjusting these factors to public life and eloquence. We neglect that discipline which deals with the differential features of the virtues and vices...with the typical characteristics of the various ages of man, of the two sexes, of social and economic class, race and nation, and with the art of seemly conduct in life, the most difficult of all arts.

(DR, p. 32)

The core of Johnson's poetic canon rests on just this combined concern for "ethics" and the "typical characteristics" of humankind. We have only to recall his *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* or his diatribe against the pastoral in *Rambler* 37 to see that Johnson's most frequent criticisms stem from poetic abuses of either morality or reality. Imlac, in *Rasselas*, speaks for Johnson and echoes Vico when he tells the Prince that

knowledge of nature is only half the task of a poet; he must be acquainted with all the modes of life. His character requires that he estimate the happiness and misery of every condition; observe the power of all the passions in all their combinations, and trace the changes of the human mind as they are modified by various institutions and accidental influences of climate or custom, from the spriteliness of

infancy to the despondence of decrepitude...he must consider right or wrong in their abstracted and invariable state...and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same...

(TFW, p. 1030)

Thus the essence of poetry for both men lies in its ability to capture Vico's "ideal or universal truth" (DR, p. 42). Vico echoes Horace and anticipates Johnson when he equates the duties of poet and philosopher. "The poet teaches by delighting what the philosopher teaches austerely," he tells us. "Both teach moral duties, and both incite to virtue and deter from vice" by depicting human habits and behavior (DR, p. 43). Like Johnson, Vico sees that persuasion to goodness can only occur through "plastic portrayals of exalted actions and characters" (DR, p. 43), and like Vico, Johnson sees that a poet may "depart from the daily semblances of truth, in order to be able to frame a loftier semblance of reality" (DR, p. 43). In his "Preface" to *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, Johnson's defense of the abused Shakespearean "unities" volubly proclaims his Vichian ability to seek poetic truth beyond neo-classical rules.²¹

The parallels between Vico and Johnson are equally close in their attitudes toward antiquity. Once again, striking similarities in thought and expression — even taking into account the different languages — strains the absolute conviction that eighteenth-century England remained untouched by the Italian thinker and vice versa. And yet, we have no evidence at all to suspect that Dr. Johnson had ever read or heard of the still obscure Neapolitan rhetorician named Giambattista Vico. In the *De ratione* Vico concludes that "our reading...should be governed by the judgment of centuries; let us place our educational methods under their auspices and protection" (DR, p. 74). Again, the evidence of undeniable — although delayed — cultural convergence in Johnson's "Preface" of 1756: "The reverence due to writings that have long subsisted...is the consequence of acknowledged and indubitable positions, that what has been longest known has been most considered, and what is most considered is best understood" (TFW, p. 1067). In fact, the "Method" of study Johnson proposes in *Rambler* 154 (1751), if translated into Latin, could be slipped into the *De ratione* unnoticed; if one "hopes to become eminent in any...Part of Knowledge," Johnson recommends, "he must first possess himself of

the intellectual Treasures which the Diligence of former Ages has accumulated, and then endeavor to encrease them by his own Collections" (TFW, p. 1000). Vico puts it this way: "The Ancients should be read first, since they are of proved reliability and authority" (DR, p. 74).

Johnson and Vico share the Baroque commonplace that the individual recapitulates the "immutable set of 'cultural stages' which the whole of mankind has traversed in its growth from infancy to adulthood, from primitivism to civilization."²² Again in his "Preface" to Shakespeare, Johnson echoes Vico with "Nations, like individuals, have their infancy" (TFW, p. 1075). But despite their many striking congruencies, it is here that the two great thinkers part company. Where Johnson sees the fabulous world of mythical "giants, dragons, and enchantments" (TFW, p. 1075) as evidence of "vulgar," "plebeian," or "childish" credulity, Vico, in the *De ratione* and the *Scienza Nuova*, elevates mythic imaginings of the "phantasia puerilis" to their own level of reality — a reality purer and more spiritually valid than Johnson's "maturer knowledge."

It is because of his attitude toward primitivism and "phantasia puerilis" that Vico has been sundered from his more neo-classical attitudes and labeled a "pre-Romanticist." But such a view is facile, reductive, and misleading. Vico is, above all, a humanist, a philosopher, and a denizen of the 1700's. If he leaves his eighteenth-century contemporaries behind, it is not because he is atypical of his time, but because he pushes his theories to the level where modern sociology is only now endeavoring. Vico's seminal ideas on the individual's construction of social reality lie at the heart of the last decade's sociological controversy. And when, in his final peroration in the *De ratione*, Vico decries the fragmentation of education into the teachings of conflicting disciplines,²³ and calls for a new concept of education based on the organic unity of culture, he anticipates by over three hundred years the dilemma now facing American universities.

Notes

1. C.E. Vaughan, "Giambattista Vico: An Eighteenth-Century Pioneer," in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 6 (1921-22), p. 288.
2. Giorgio Tagliacozzo, Preface, *Giambattista Vico, An International Symposium*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Hayden V. White (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), p.vii. Hereafter referred to in text as *Symposium*.
3. Rene Wellek, "The Supposed Influence of Vico on England and Scotland in the Eighteenth Century," in *Symposium*, p. 223.
4. Wellek, *Symposium*, p. 218.
5. Maria Goretti, "Vico's Pedagogic Thought and that of Today," in *Symposium*, pp. 554-5.
6. Fausto Nicolini, quoted in Translator's Introduction, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, ed. and trans. Elio Gianturco (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p.x.
7. See Richard Foster Jones, *Ancients and Moderns: A Study of the Background of the "Battle of the Books"*, Washington University Studies, 6 (1936).
8. Jones, p.viii.
9. Enrico de Mas, "Vico's Four Authors," in *Symposium*, p. 8.
10. Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, p. 9. All further references to this work are made in the text as "*De ratione*" or DR.
11. Goretti, *Symposium*, p. 574.
12. See *On the Study Methods*, p. 8. Vico includes, as "complementary aids," "works of literature and of the fine arts whose excellence designates them as patterns of perfection; types used in the printing; and universities as institutions of learning."
13. Domenico Vittorini, "Giambattista Vico and Reality: An Evaluation of *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (1708)," *MLQ*, 13 (1952), p. 92.
14. Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of A Tub*, in *Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings*, ed. Louis A. Landa (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 331.
15. Swift, *The Battle of Books*, p. 373.
16. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, Book III, p. 128.
17. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, Book III, p. 144.
18. Swift, *A Tale of A Tub*, p. 332.
19. Remo Fornaca, *Il pensiero educativo di Giambattista Vico* (Torino: G. Giappichelli Editore, 1957), p. 206.
20. John Dennis, *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry in Eighteenth Century English Literature*, ed. Tillotson, Fussell, and Waingrow (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969), p. 464. Hereafter referred to as TFW in the text.
21. See Johnson's "Preface," TFW, pp. 1072-3.
22. Elio Gianturco, Translator's Introduction, *On the Study Methods*, p.xxvii.
23. These unharmonized disciplines are mentioned in the *De ratione* on p. 77. (Aristotelian, Epicurean, Cartesian, Galenist, Accursian, Fauvreaan, Alciatian.)