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The Middle Ground

Edmund E. Jacobitti

Review-essay on *New Vico Studies*, Vol. III. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1985; and *Bollettino del centro di studi vichiani*. Naples: Bibliopolis, 1985.

Bleib nicht auf ebnem Feld!
Steig nicht zu hoch hinaus!
Am schönsten sieht die Welt
Von halber Hohe aus.

—Nietzsche

There are certain obvious differences between *New Vico Studies*, with its emphasis upon Vico's relevance to the twentieth century, and the *Bollettino del centro di studi vichiani*, with its emphasis upon situating Vico in the context of his own time. Moreover, *Bollettino's* concentration on the earlier period is not a result of the fact that the issue here under review was published in conjunction with the recent *Mostra on Civiltà del Seicento a Napoli*. It is rather a natural outgrowth of its founder's program.

Bollettino was founded in 1971 as an annual review by the late Pietro Piovani, whose still-evident program was to set Vico in his own time and overcome, among other things, the idealist

view that Vico was but a precursor of Croce. This issue of *Bollettino* describes the Naples of Vico's birth, a kingdom in full seventeenth-century crisis where government, language, hierarchy, agreed-upon forms and relationships—all the ingredients of common sense—had become questionable, an order of things in transition, no longer feudal and not yet modern.

It was a culture traced in Vincenzo Pacelli's "L'ideologia del potere nella ritrattistica napoletana del seicento." Pacelli, in effect, uses both sides of the palette to describe not only the revolutionary changes in style ushered in by Caravaggio and *i caravaggeschi*, but the rise of the bourgeois class who, more and more, were financially able to ape the nobility and have themselves painted on canvas, sculpted in marble, frescoed on walls, and woven into tapestries by the great artists of the time—Caravaggio, Bolgi, Finelli, Selitto, and so on. Pacelli notes similar changes in the kind of art that appeared in the Church. As the purchasing power of the landed nobility declined and that of the newly monied class grew, the ecclesiastical authorities became more and more interested in the bourgeoisie, more and more willing to sell them the space for chapels in the great churches of Naples. A veritable scramble to sell and buy the chapels took place as rival families staked out turf in the holy sanctuaries and the moneychangers moved back into the temple:

thus while the De Franchis, the Spinelli, the Carafa had their chapels in san Domenico Maggiore and the Cortone, Fontana, Noris, and Coreggio, the Fenaroli—all contractors, Lombard nobles, great merchants, and moneychangers—took over and decorated the chapels in sant'Anna dei Lombardi, the ever active bankers Spinola and Costa took up their places in san Giorgio dei Genovesi. . . . the Borello family found space at Gesù Nuovo, Francesco Rocco at Pietà dei Turchini, Giulio Mastrilli at Purgatorio ad Arco . . .

and so on *ad infinitum* (212). The growing number of middle-class family portraits, the number of chapels filled with marble statuary and sarcophaghi immortalizing bourgeois entrepreneurs like De Franchi, Cesareo, Mastrilli, Cacace and so on serve as artistic testimony to the growing power of money, the rise not (yet) of *l'uomo qualunque*, but *l'homme bourgeois*.

The decline of the old order in political philosophy is set out in Enrico Nuzzo's "I percorsi della 'quiete,'" which brilliantly traces the efforts of Giovanni Antonio Palazzo and Ottavio Sammarco—those symptoms of seventeenth-century political crisis—to wrestle with Botero's and Machiavelli's notions of *ragion di*

stato—and still preserve the fixed Aristotelian models and forms. Yet—try as they might—as change escaped man’s ability to control it, as casuistic interpretation crept into counter-reformation religion and politics, the old “Aristotelian” theories (really, by now an Aristotle Christianized, censored, and warmed up for vegetarians) were no longer able to explain reality. In fact, despite all the efforts of Palazzo to redefine *ragione di stato* into *VERA ragione di stato*, that is, *raison d’état* without *étatisme*, the serpent, we read, was already in the garden: right and wrong were hopelessly confused and decline was imminent. It was that imminence of decline that led Sammarco to renounce all change and opt for the *status quo*.

We see similar evidence of the accelerating social conflict and shattered common sense in Pier Luigi Rovito’s discussion of whether the Kingdom of Naples was a feudal or modern state in his article “Funzioni pubbliche e capitalismo signorile,” and in Aurelio Musi’s “Tra burocrati e notabili” as well as Giovanni Muto’s “Problema monetario.”

New Vico Studies is the still-growing creation of the tireless Giorgio Tagliacozzo, director of the Institute of Vico Studies in New York. Tagliacozzo, like Piovani, has imprinted his own perspective on his journal. Tagliacozzo’s central thesis is that ours is an age peculiarly ready for and already open to Vico, an age fed up with the Cartesian *cogito*, mechanical *ratio*, and shallow speculation. It is a thesis hard to deny when one contemplates the number and diversity of thinkers influenced by Vico, among which—to name only a few—we find Isaiah Berlin, Hayden White, H. S. Hughes, Louis Mink, Max Fisch, Norman O. Brown, Max Horkheimer, Jurgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, Northrop Frye, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Stephen Toulmin, Ernesto Grassi, and so on. The accuracy of Tagliacozzo’s theory is all the more evident as one peruses his opening article in each issue of *New Vico Studies*. In these articles, Tagliacozzo traces the origin and growth of the contemporary interest in Vico—an interest also evident in the collections of articles periodically edited by Tagliacozzo, Verene, and White that also aim at examining Vico’s relationship not to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but to the twentieth.

The general philosophical thrust of Tagliacozzo’s journal is evident in the articles and review-essays which stress the key points of Vico’s relevance to our contemporary world. The central feature of this contemporary world is the disintegration of the rationalist empire that had, in the seventeenth century, established Cartesian *ratio* as a—or rather THE—only permissible form of wisdom, a form that supposedly banished skepticism and gave man a fixed standard for measuring a supposedly fixed Newtonian

world. Reducing a complex world to pretty theoretical schemes became, for more than 300 years, the measure of great thought—until today when, with the collapse of that standard, we find ourselves in the so-called crisis of modernity. It is a crisis that, like a bath of cold water, has brought us back to a face-to-face confrontation with reality undisguised by wishful thinking and whistling in the dark. It is a crisis set out in so much contemporary thought¹ but nowhere better than in Jean-François Lyotard's provocative 1979 *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*.² Lyotard surveys the remains, noting the failures of those seemingly invincible rationalist metanarratives that once swept away local fables and narratives with their inexorable *logique*; and he advocates, in the place of the all-encompassing metaprison, what he calls "local determinism," which is not too different from what Deleuze calls "particularistic lines of flight."

Vico long ago chastised men of mere abstract theory ("Men of limited ideas take for law what the words expressly say"), predicted the collapse of "abstract reason run amok" ("Learned fools fell to calumniating the truth"), and noted—against those who sought to avoid the harshness of the world—that "the world is always governed by those who are naturally the best (*migliori*)."³

It is from the smoke and rubble of the rationalist empire that Vico emerges as a guide to lead us back to reality, to a more sober-minded and realistic assessment of man's place in the world—an assessment set out long before the rationalist pipe dream swept us off our feet. Vico leads us back to that branch of ancient wisdom that teaches that man does not find the world fixed and stable before him, an arena in which he is free to wander about and take the measure. Vico teaches us, instead, the *verum factum convertuntur*, teaches us that the world is made by human beings. Vico, in short, points us to the relationship of *mythos* and *logos*; and his pioneering role is plain from the fact that, because of the *verum-ipsum-factum*, he saw this relationship long before we, with our current post-structuralist perspective, were led to similar conclusions.

The relationship between *mythos* and *logos* is the subject of José Faur's *New Vico Studies* article, "The Splitting of the Logos: Some Remarks on Vico and Rabbinic Tradition." Faur—following Verene, Grassi, and others—examines the Western idea that "knowledge" comes only after we filter off rhetoric, leaving behind the pure gold of *ratio*. As Faur points out, Vico's alternative wisdom rests on a *logos* and *mythos* that are not separate but interrelated. The ultimate implications of the *verum/factum*, in short, are that man does not find the world, he founds it. He is not, therefore, a discoverer, but a creator. This "founding" takes place, according

to Vico, because of early man's poetic, creative nature. This is the key discovery of the *Scienza nuova*; and it makes Vico extremely modern, placing him among those who see language not as a transparent instrument for finding truth, but as man's method for constituting truth. Long before Martin Heidegger began his quest for the nature of true being and unified presence, Vico saw that being was not outside man but within him. Heidegger's quest, in other words, was a case of tail-chasing.

In this sense, we may appreciate as well Hwa Yol Jung's article in *New Vico Studies*, "Vico and Bakhtin: A Prolegomenon to any Future Comparison," which stresses that "for Bakhtin as for Vico, language cannot be separated from the conception of reality or the world" (158). Likewise, Stephan Daniel, in "Vico and Mythic Figuration as Prerequisite for Philosophic Literacy," also in *New Vico Studies*, provides an analysis of the "union of sense-based language and sense-based nature" and of Vico's discovery of the "mythic forms of thought that lie at the base of rational inquiry" (61).

The idea that *verum* is the *factum* of man should not, however, leave us with the idea that Vico's is an intellectual topics. In fact, it is, as Nancy Struever ("Rhetoric and Philosophy in Vichian Inquiry") and Daniel emphasize, a sensory topics, and it is this sensory element that keeps Vico grounded in the real world rather than in idealist metaphysics. Vico's topics, in short, provided him long ago with a ready-to-hand method for getting to *die Sache selbst*.

Likewise, we might add, Vichian topics also provide us with an alternative to subjectivist Cartesianism, for Vico's topics are not grounded in the first-person singular, but in the first-person plural. The litmus test of Vichian reason/practice is *sensus communis*: that which is held in "common." On the other hand, hostile as Vico was to the anarchic epistemological standard of the ego, he does not envision the erasure of the subject, for both subject and other are required in order to account for the developing *sensus communis* that surrounds and shapes us and which we, in turn, shape.

In *Bollettino* and *New Vico Studies*, we have, in short, two journals with different frames of reference. Still, there is an evident convergence of perspectives; for despite—or perhaps because of—*Bollettino's* concentration on the *barocco*, the journal provides us with a past world that is, with all its dissolving certainties, unnervingly familiar to our own post-modern world. The seventeenth century, like our own time, was witness to the dissolution of the quick fix, the ready answer, the narrative and the metanarrative. And, because our age is so similar to the baroque, Tagliacozzo is right about the timeliness of Vico for our own problems.

Still, many eras are similar to our own; and, as *New Vico Studies* frequently points out, there is more to Vico's timeliness than the eerie similarity of his age to ours. There is also the profundity and, well, ready-to-handedness, of his thought—an aspect of Vico more likely to stand out in Tagliacozzo's journal than in the *Bollettino*, which is more strictly historical.

One of the disturbing things for Italian scholars today is the lack of interest in Italian studies among American and English-speaking scholars. Everyone has heard of Machiavelli, Dante, Boccaccio—the whole Italian Renaissance. But at the end of the seventeenth century, at least as popular scholarly opinion has it, the light went out. There were, of course, a few brief meteoric flashes from Italy—De Sanctis, Croce, Gramsci—but, on the whole, the center of focus shifted in the eighteenth century to France and in the nineteenth to Germany. And today our minds still remain focused somewhere between the post-structuralist *pouvoir/savoir* and *il n'y a rien hors du texte* on the one hand, and the hermeneutic search for pure being, unified presence, and *Horizontverschmelzung* on the other. Were it not for the fact that we know that academic minds too (and maybe academic minds more than others) like to tread only on familiar ground, we might find it odd that so many Anglo-American intellectuals today should still focus their attention almost exclusively on France and Germany. Certainly, part of the importance of *New Vico Studies* stems from its ability to awaken us to a whole, hitherto ignored, intellectual environment.

The value of *Bollettino* is, ironically, also important for the same reason; for even Italian intellectuals seem to have been mesmerized by *oltralpini* thinkers whose traditions, in fact, provided the icons of the now evidently discredited Western "religion" of rationalism. And even though scholars and thinkers in France and Germany now appear to be in full retreat from those imaginary objective worlds, the doubts, questions, and problems raised on their retreats have themselves simmered for so long in their respective national contextual stews that their answers, too, seem to bear a kind of national flavor.

It is time to look elsewhere—not back to Heidegger's pre-Socratics or to a misunderstood Plato trivialized into a Cartesian rationalist—but back to the rhetoric of the Renaissance, even back to the (supposedly nonexistent) intellectual traditions of Rome as found in Cicero, Horace, and Quintilian; and finally, back to the true Plato, to Isocrates, the Aristotle of the *Topics*, and to Aristophanes.

In this, Vico—one of the few moderns to understand this other tradition—can play the key role, for his moderate rejection

of rationalism walked a middle ground between Hobbes's baroque bravado and Pascal's angst-ridden flip of the coin.

It is not possible to say, reading these journals, what Vico's most important message was—there were too many of them—but three, it appears to me, stand out. First and surely one of the most important of Vico's insights was his following out of the *verum-ipsum-factum*, which he expounded in the *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia* [On the Ancient Wisdom of the Italians]. This led Vico to a rejection of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* and to a conflation of *mythos* and *logos*. This is the "ground" for nearly all modern thought and far more fertile than the *Abgrund* that seems up to now to have received all our attention.

Second was Vico's effort to reawaken our appreciation of the natural instability of human affairs by recalling the ancients' theory of cyclical history. It is important to put this in a modern perspective. Vico's theory of cycles is neither a fixed *a priori* nor a dismissal of all things fixed. The *corso e ricorso* of states, men, groups, religions, and so forth is again a moderate middle ground. It stands midway between the extreme post-structuralist flight into what Prezzolini (unfortunately, with approbation) liked to call "the night, the mystery, and the secret," and the Germanic trek back to a camouflaged *Primum Mobile*.

Like many modern structuralists, Vico also noticed that there was a kind of pattern to society's signs. This pattern is not, however, a fixed structure, but a *corso*, a passage *through* three kinds of natures, customs, natural laws, governments, languages, reasons, and so on. This is the natural course of all things man-made.

This cycle is not a *deus ex machina*, but merely the norm—like man's own birth, life, and death—lived out by most but not all states. It has no definite time span and merely states that all things man-made will perish and that moderation in theory and practice is the only way to prolong the cycle. The cycle provides, in short, a flexible "structural" prism through which life can be viewed. It is not, however, a hymn to resignation nor a magic formula or incantation: *Aufhebung!* *Fizz!* *Goop!* as one wag put it.

Moreover, the cycle is not one universal cycle, but many intersecting ones. It is not only the cycle of one's own state that accounts for the complexity of the world, but that of other states, of classes, nations, groups, or all mankind together. Indeed, as everyone has a perspective shaped to some extent by his place in one or more *corsi*, man's opinions about how the *corso* might be flattened out constitute themselves a kind of cycle. The only unity is provided by the fact that our focus is always on and shaped by

the rise and fall of the various orders of things. Stability, structure, the state of nature, the thoughts of God and *Weltgeists*, functionalism, Kantian *a priori*, and so on—provide us with abstract fantasies and shield our vision of the true nature of things.

A major difference between Vico's structuralism and the more rigid varieties of the once-fashionable modern structuralists, lies in the fact that because of the complexity of the convergent cycles, Vico did not believe a totalist reduction of society through universal semanticization was possible. In Vico there is always conflict, difference, asymmetry—in short, *politics*. Everyone has a different perspective; and unity is, blessedly, inconceivable. Because the puzzle never seems to have all the pieces, one can never eliminate what Habermas dismisses as "border warfare." In short, Vico shares a bit of Jean-François Lyotard's applause for "local determinism."

On the other hand, the difference between Vico and modern Neronian radicalism lies in the fact that—while there is difference (and *differance*) in Vico—*langue*, synchrony, and everything else is not reduced simply to the event, to *parole*, to just "one damned thing after another." Vico's is a middle ground between determinism and voluntarism, between, on the one hand, a meaningless temporality, a diachronic *a posteriori* and, on the other, a mechanical Cartesianism or a Germanic, concealed, ever-disclosing *a priori* *Weltgeist*. Vico, in short, leaves us with an explanation of asymmetry that is lodged in the real Heraclitian nature of "the things themselves," in the *corsi e ricorsi*: not a cure-all, but a realistic analytical tool.

The importance of our recognition of this natural flux of things, of the *corso*—an embarrassment, of course, to all self-respecting and proper Moderns who believe everything must either be meaningless or fixed—is set out, among other places, in Emanuele Riveros's analysis of "History as Metascience," which established the "cultural impact of one nation upon another" and the dislocations that result.

The uniqueness and the importance of the cycle stand out as well in Timothy Bahti's suggestive "Vico and Frye: A Note," in *New Vico Studies*, where the meaning of time and of "keeping time"—whether God's or man's—is used to provide a basis for meaning itself. Bahti explains the Vichian base of Frye's famous analysis of meaning as humanity's attempt to link its own activity to that of nature. Time becomes not chronological and historical but horizontal and reflects a series of concentric, converging circles of human meaning. In Frye's case, of course, it is literature that

converges and interacts with the other levels of human meaning.

A third important lesson we can gain from Vico is his political realism. Certainly the key message of Nancy Struever's brilliant and insightful Petrarchan/Socratic injunction to seriously address the issue of "how we shall live" brings this realism to mind. Thus, she reminds us that the proper course for Vico was the middle one; for Vico's rhetoric is not a destruction of philosophy as such, but a destruction of "moralistic and moralizing philosophy," of "academic colonization of the philosophical task." Vico is not Jacques Derrida or Paul De Man; nor is he the classical, "moral," civic humanist designed by Hans Baron. Thus, as Professor Struever puts it, if you start down the Derridean and Demanian path, "you can't stop," while—if I may paraphrase it—if you remain in the realm of "simplistic Whiggish and civic humanist assumptions," you cannot start.

In conclusion, we might say that both journals lead one to an appreciation of Vico's place in modern thought—even though *Bollettino* gets us there by dint of a kind of Vichian providence. In any case, both the Vico of the seventeenth and eighteenth and the Vico of the twentieth century are necessary; for the point is to remind non-Italians of Vico's way and to recall Italians to *their own* traditions; for, as Bertrando Spaventa noted almost a hundred years ago, even though "we got there late, we were first":⁴ now *there* is a post-modern paradox!

1. For example, Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Marx Poster, *Foucault, Marxism and History: Mode of Production versus Mode of Information* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984); *Postmodernism and Politics*, ed. Johnathan Arac (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

2. Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1979 (English translation *The Postmodern Condition*, [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984]).

3. G. Vico, *The New Science*, translation by T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), paragraphs 319 and 1102.

4. "La filosofia italiana dal secolo XVI al nostro tempo," in B. Spaventa, *Opere*, vol. 2, ed. Giovanni Gentile (Florence, 1972), p. 609.