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The Beast, the Hieroglyph, and Pizza: Vico on Language and Poetry

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Giambattista Vico was a Neapolitan philosopher who lived from 1668 to 1744. Today he is chiefly remembered as the author of *The New Science*. The third centennial of his birth in 1968 occasioned an International Symposium with the participation of important scholars from different countries and different academic disciplines. The proceedings were edited by Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Hayden White and published in a large volume by Johns Hopkins University Press. Tagliacozzo also founded the Institute for Vico Studies and has promoted many other symposia and published several other volumes of articles devoted to Vico over the past two decades. Vico scholarship has proliferated in many academic quarters on both sides of the Atlantic. The Italian thinker is being hailed as a seminal figure in many disciplines: philosophy, political science, history, economics, linguistics, anthropology, and, of course, literature and literary theory.

This renewed interest in Vico and the current enthusiasm for his ideas seem to derive mostly from his notions of the nature of language and poetry, and how these shape human history and culture. And the reason that his thought has spawned, and continues to spawn, so much study and so many interpretations is that it is extremely rich and complex.

Vico wrote three versions of *The New Science*. The third, and definitive edition, was published after his death in 1744. He revised his ideas considerably in the two decades between the first edition of 1725 and the last one. The 1744 edition is divided into five books, plus an Introduction called "Idea of the Work," and a "Conclusion of the Work." The books are entitled: 1) "Establishment of Principles," 2) "Poetic Wisdom," 3) "Discovery of the True Homer," 4) "The Course the Nations Run," and 5) "The Recourse of Human Institutions which the Nations Take when They Rise Again." Two of the books, the second and third, which together comprise about two thirds of the work, are devoted to poetry and language. And that's where the beast and the hieroglyph come into the picture.

Perhaps the best known and the most striking feature of *The New Science* is Vico's account of the rebirth of human history after the great flood. As the Earth dried, Noah's progeny wandered through the mountains and forests as wild beasts. Vico refers to them as "bestioni" or "giganti," large beasts or giants. They had no language, no laws, no community, no
intelligence whatsoever. Then, two-hundred years after the flood, atmospheric conditions produced the first thunderclap, which caused these human beasts to look up at the sky and be aware of it for the first time. This was the moment when language and consciousness were born (173, 211-212).

In places Vico presents this birth as a natural or onomatopoeic progression. The first utterances were monosyllabic imitations of natural sounds (141, 147): pa for the thunderclap, which became pape, which in turn became the name of Jove, the god or being who must have shouted the thunder; and eventually it also became the word for "father" (246). This scenario has much in common with subsequent speculation on the problem of how language originated, and may be categorized as typical of the Romantic notion of language as a natural and referential extension of the world, as representation.

However, when Vico looks more closely at this moment of the birth of language an entirely different picture emerges of how it came about. It turns out that when the beast said pa he was not imitating so much as projecting. In order to understand the thunder and the world of which he now became aware the beast could only impose his own feelings and perceptions on it. Since he, himself, yelled when he was angry, this must also be a yell, and there had to be an angry entity who was yelling in anger: Jove.

This is an important difference. It means that language and consciousness are not defined and shaped by nature or reality, but that, on the contrary, reality is a projection of language and consciousness (135, 222-224). In these passages, therefore, Vico does not say that the first language consisted of onomatopoeic, monosyllabic utterances, but of hieroglyphs, that is, of abstract symbols. There may have been grunts and shouts, but they weren't yet language. The first language, he says, was poetic and metaphorical, not referential or mimetic. Men first had to create signs, and these signs subsequently allowed them to understand the world and define themselves (130, 233, 238, 253-354).

Now, to say that language began with hieroglyphs is to say that it began as writing, not as utterance, or natural speech. And this, of course, is at the core of the thought of the contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida and of what has come to be known as deconstruction. In what is perhaps Derrida's most influential book, Of Grammatology, he attacks thinkers like Plato, Rousseau, and De Saussure for presenting speech as primary and writing as secondary; speech as somehow more natural representation of reality and writing as a more artificial representation of speech. Derrida insists instead that language, whether spoken or written, is always "writing," a symbolic system which has no "natural" link to anything outside itself.
Thus Vico is right at the center of current debates and controversies about the nature of language and literature. And this explains the extraordinary amount of attention he is receiving, at least in the Anglo-American academic world. In Italy, it's another matter. Though the Centro di studi vichiani (Center for Vico Studies) in Naples publishes a yearly Bollettino and a series of monographs on Vico's though, if one were to consult Italian bibliographies over the same twenty-year period one would not find the number or the variety of studies that we've had in this country; which makes Vico much like pizza—and not just because of a shared Neapolitan origin. But, to explain that simile I'll have to put it in proper context, that is: McDonald's hamburgers, Bruce Springsteen, and caves.

Last semester a couple of young women from Sicily visited my second year Italian class. I decided to use them for conversational and cultural practice. I had the students ask them questions and then asked them some questions myself. Since that week we had been talking about the "Americanization" of many aspects of Italian culture—from language to fashion to entertainment and the arts—my questions probed the extent of this American influence. The two young women confirmed that Italians wore "blue jeans," and drank Coca Cola and 7-up (which some older Italians call "Zup," confusing the 7 followed by a hyphen with a Z), and brushed their teeth with "ultra bright" and "close-up," and watched American movies and American TV programs.

But I could tell that one of the young women was getting a little irritated by my questions. When I asked whether they had McDonald's or other hamburger chains in Sicily, she exclaimed, somewhat exasperated, "Ma certo!" (But of course!), "Scusi ma lei da quanto tempo manca dall'Italia?" (Excuse me, but just how long have you been away from Italy, anyway?). When I told her I had been there the year before she seemed a little skeptical. I realized that she probably perceived me as an immigrant who had left Italy in the Dark Ages, i.e. the pre-McDonald Era, and was now conveying who-knows-what distorted and antiquated notions of Italian life to his students. However, I kept asking questions: about computers and computer language, "shopping centers," "rock and roll." Since that was the week that Bruce Springsteen's multi-record anthology, "Live 1975-85," came out, I asked if they and their friends knew Bruce Springsteen's music. Well, that was the last straw, the ultimate insult. "Nooo!" she exclaimed sarcastically, "Stiamo ancora nelle caverne!" (We're still living in caves!). She could no longer contain her surprise and disgust at my ignorance of just how "with it" Italy is these days.

Now, if I interpret her sarcasm correctly, the gist of it was this: a knowledge and appreciation of anything American stands as proof of modernity and vitality; whereas the lack of such knowledge and appreciation is proof that the person, or the society, must still be living in the days of the cavemen.
Everything that's American is "OK;" that which is strictly Italian is by definition old-fashioned, awkward, a little embarrassing.

This attitude seems to spill over into the field of Italian literary criticism and theory as well; at least the negative facet of the attitude, the reluctance to dwell on native figures and movements. To really be "with it," it seems, the critic must quote and analyze a foreign thinker or school. French thinkers are popular—as they are in this country—, those whom Hayden White has dubbed the "Holy Family" of post-structuralism: Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida. Soviet scholars, such as Lotman, Uspensky and the Tartu semiotic school have received considerable attention, as has the German Frakfort school (Gadam, Jauss, Iser, etc.). For a Marxist view the Hungarian Gyorgy Lakács is often preferred over the homegrown Antonio Gramsci. And the Russian Mikhail Bakhtin is surely more important these days than Benedetto Croce—poor cave dweller that he was!

Such xenophobia is not limited to twentieth-century figures: Nietzsche, Marx, Hegel; and, a little closer to our concerns, Kant, Rousseau and even Renato Delle Carle himself, that is Vico's arch-nemesis, René Descartes: all of them seem to receive more press than the Neapolitan philosopher.

But those of you acquainted with Italian literary studies are probably shaking your heads: "Not true! Vico is mentioned a lot!" Of course he is: in all the literary histories, the anthologies, the literary encyclopedias and dictionaries—all of which abound in Italy. But, as Maria Goretti points out:

The modernity of an author isn't measured only by the number of studies dedicated to his or her thought . . . but mostly by what motivates scholars to trace the paths of that thought in order to discover its foundations and decipher its meanings. . . . An author may be considered truly modern and present when his or her thought is probed in order to find in it a voice that can shed light on the problems of our own day. (252) (My translation)

And it seems to me that, in Italy, Vico for the most part is not yet being studied in the original, creative, and fruitful way stipulated by Goretti. He gets his due attention in all the scholastic manuals, but in a perfunctory, conventionalized manner. His thought is dutifully presented in a schematic fashion, encrusted, as Goretti says, "by crocean interpretations which have been mummified through the ritual reiteration found in school textbooks" (253, my translation). There is, to be sure, no explicit and comprehensive refusal of Vico and other Italian thinkers, in favor of foreign ones; only a reluctance to see them as truly pertinent to today's problems and tomorrow's solutions.
Alberto Asor Rosa, for example, in his introduction to the fourth volume of the new Einaudi Letteratura Italiana, a volume devoted to "Interpretation," starts out by talking about the methods proposed by Descartes and Jean Mabillon and ends up discussing Foucault, Derrida, Todorov, and Heidegger. No mention of Vico!

Similarly, Omar Calabrese and Egidio Mucci end their Guida a la semiotica (Guide to Semiotics) of 1975 with an appendix, an outline of a possible history of semiotic ideas. The historical sketch goes from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Hegel, with headings devoted to Descartes, Bacon, Hobbes, Port-Royale, Locke, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, and Condillac. Vico is nowhere to be found!

Well, you say, perhaps Vico's thought had nothing to do with such things as semiotics and literary critical method. Why then would Terrence Hawkes in his book, Structuralism and Semiotics, published at about the same time as the Calabrese/Mucci book, begin his discussion, not with Plato or Aristotle, or Peirce or De Saussure, but with Vico, presenting him almost as the founder of structuralist and semiotic thought?

The one genuinely distinctive and permanent human characteristic is discernible in the faculty of "poetic wisdom," which manifests itself as the capacity and the necessity to generate myths, and to use language metaphorically: to deal with the world, that is, not directly but at one remove by means of other agencies; not literally, but poetically. "There must," Vico insists, "in the nature of human institutions be a mental language common to all nations which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects" (161). This "mental language" manifests itself as man's universal capacity not only to formulate structures, but also to submit his own nature to the demands of their structuring. The gift of sapienza poetica [poetic wisdom] could thus be said to be the gift of structuralism. It is a principle which informs the way all human beings always live. To be human, it claims, is to be a structuralist. (15)

And why does Edward Said end his influential book, Beginnings, with a lengthy chapter entitled: "Conclusion: Vico in His Work and in This"? Said's book was also first published in 1975, the same year as the Calabrese/Mucci book. "Vico's place at the conclusion of a book on beginnings," Said says, is due to the fact that "Vico is the prototypical modern thinker who perceives beginning as an activity requiring the writer to maintain an unstraying obligation to practical reality and sympathetic imagination in equally strong parts" (349). Vico, he claims:
discovered the basically utilitarian inner function of language, which is to make man's impressions of the world intelligible to him. Understanding means defining and restricting, it means isolating the essential from among a welter of tumbling impressions. In the very act of understanding the world, man is in reality understanding himself. The language that a man speaks, then, makes the man, and not man the language. (364)

With such an awareness, Said writes, Vico clearly anticipated the thought of the French New Criticism: that of Barthes, Derrida, Lacan and Foucault.

In a 1983 article on "Vico and the Radical Wing of Structuralist/Post-structuralist Thought Today," Hayden White asked: "Is there any possible relationship--whether of influence, similarity, affinity or opposition--between Vico's thought and that of the current avant garde in the human sciences: the structuralist/post-structuralist current?" (63). He suggests, albeit with some reservation, that there is:

the singular position which the avant garde accords to language in the determination of the forms and process of human culture might provide a ground for sympathetic reception of Vico's New Science. The Structuralist/post-structuralist insistence on the figurative nature of all language and a fortiori all systems of thought might accord nicely with Vico's notions of the "poetic" origins of human formations. (64)

Why is it, then, that Anglo-American scholars have recently been able to see Vico's work in such a radically new light? (Interestingly enough, the French thinkers to whom Vico is often linked haven't shown much interest in, or even knowledge of, the Italian philosopher; perhaps because of what Hayden White refers to as "that notorious cultural ethnocentrism that marks so much of modern French thought in this century" [64].)

Perhaps what is at work is a kind of ostranenie, the Russian formalist notion of defamiliarization, the same process that makes Italian scholars find inspiration in foreign thinkers. We all tend merely to recognize and accept the artifacts in our own cultural museums. We are so familiar with them, or assume that we know them so well, that they can no longer generate new impressions or new ideas. It's only by visiting other cultural museums that we are forced to shake up our systems of knowledge, to make new comparisons and juxtapositions which force us to reevaluate the content of our own museums. Or, something similar can happen if a foreign visitor comes to our museum, and, instead of accepting our platitudes about its artifacts, forces us to see an aspect of the artifact we had never noticed before (if the Japanese, say, come and remove centuries of soot from the Sistine Chapel to reveal a Michelangelo we hadn't even suspect of being hidden there).
All of which, fortunately, takes us back to our pizza, before it gets too cold. Pizza, a very humble artifact in the museum of Italian culture, has undergone precisely such a process of ostranenie. When I returned to Italy about a dozen years ago after a long absence, I was struck not by the number of hamburger restaurants, which were still extremely rare then, but by the number of pizzerie which I had never recalled seeing before. They were obviously catering to American tourists, rather than satisfying the demands of Italian consumers. In fact, I suspect that in many parts of Central and Northern Italy native Italians probably hadn't even known what pizza was until a few years ago.

Imported into the United States by poor families from Southern Italy, pizza eventually became a rage in this country, becoming a a fast-food staple along with hamburgers—indeed pushing aside the all-American hot dog as a favorite in recent years. It was thus reimported into Italy more as an American phenomenon than an Italian one. Many Italians seemed to have ambivalent attitudes toward pizza: pride that this food, which was after all Italian, had taken America by storm; puzzlement that it had, when Italian cuisine boasted of so many apparently worthier dishes; a kind of superior condescension toward these Americans, for liking this stuff so much in the first place, and secondly for liking it indiscriminately, a suspicion that Americans really couldn't appreciate good pizza; and finally a scandalized bewilderment at what Americans did to a pizza, at the toppings inflicted on it—the quantity as well as the choice of toppings ("Do Americans really eat pizza with all that sweet tomato sauce, all that gooey cheese? . . . and pineapples?").

Something similar has happened to Vico. Exported and promoted abroad by expatriates like Giorgio Tagliacozzo, Vico has become a current academic rage. Books and articles on his ideas have proliferated over the last two decades much like pizza parlors around a college campus. And the sauces and toppings with which he has been embellished have been as varied as what college students put on a pizza: Vico with Structuralism and Post-structuralism, with Marxism, with Freudian psychoanalysis; even Vico with James Joyce, to which a week-long international symposium was devoted two years ago in Venice.

It's precisely this luxuriant proliferation of interest in Vico among Anglo-American academics which makes Vico a potential fecundating agent in an Italian critical context. But it's the very fertile and varied nature of this foreign use of Vico which makes it suspect to Vico scholars in Italy. As Battistini claims, in Italy Vico studies remain anchored within a more erudite scholarship which relies on careful historical and philological research aimed at determining the author's place in his own time and culture. Anglo-American scholars, on the other hand, are less concerned with such historico-philological details. They are much bolder in making connections and juxtapositions with trends and figures in our own day (9-20).
Vico himself insisted, however, that intellectual inquiry had to take as its object both the vero (the true) and the certo (the certain) (127, 196-197). The "certain" must be attained by meticulous philological research, with attention to facts and detail. The "true," however, can also be reached by other paths: intuition, faith, and imagination—especially imagination. The two approaches, according to Vico, must support rather than oppose each other.

As Battistini points out, these two currents in Vico studies, the Anglo-American and the Italian, are not mutually exclusive at all. In fact, they are both necessary; not as independent schools, but as mutually supportive facets of the same inquiry. And they are so in a very Vichian way: philosophy coupled with philology working together to establish the vero and the certo respectively. An infusion of such imaginative Anglo-American thought into the erudite Italian context is already revitalizing Vico studies in Italy; and a revitalized Vico in an Italian critical context will surely constitute "a voice that can shed light on the problems of our own day" (Goretti 252).

Works Cited


