

*Articoli/3:*

## **Vico's vita**

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*Abstract: Vita di Giambattista Vico scritta da se medesimo* appeared in 1728. More than a recollection of his own life, Vico proposes a fable of himself, beginning with the change of his birth date. This essay illustrates the rhetorical and linguistic traits that characterize the construction of Vico's narrative, the connection to his *New Science* and the presentation of himself as a modern Socrates. If the *New Science* is the autobiography of the human race, Vico's autobiography is presented as a total human event, a cycle of three ages and providential events of fall and rise.

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Vico's autobiography, *Vita di Giambattista Vico scritta da se medesimo*, appeared in 1728 in the first issue of a journal founded at Venice, *Raccolta d'opuscoli scientifici e filologici*, edited by a young Camaldolite monk, Don Angelo Calogerà, and backed by a number of prominent scholars. Among those most closely associated with the journal were Father Carlo Lodoli, censor of publications at Venice, Abbé Antonio Conti, a Venetian nobleman, metaphysician, and mathematician, and Count Giovanni Artico di Porcia, the author of a *Proposal to the Scholars of Italy to Write Their Own Lives*, which was the document sent to Vico inviting him, along with a number of others, to write his life for publication in the *Raccolta*.

The conception of this project had been under discussion for several years among prominent thinkers in Venice and Padua. Its purpose was both patriotic and pedagogic. The collection of lives was to show, to the scholars of northern Europe generally, and specifically to the French, that there were thinkers of the first order in Italy who made important scientific and literary discoveries. The reader was also to learn, in their own words, how such thinkers had made their discoveries.

In 1730, Vico was nominated for membership in the Academy of Assorditi (Urbino) by Ludovico Antonio Muratori. As part of his membership in the Academy, Vico was asked to supply materials to be used in a volume on the lives of its members. He initially turned down this request on the grounds that such had already appeared in the *Raccolta*, but in the spring of

1731 he reconsidered the request, wrote out a corrected copy of the original of what had appeared in 1728, and drafted a continuation, interspersing the earlier events with additional episodes.

The Assorditi volume was never published but the manuscript of the corrected copy and continuation remained among Vico's papers after his death. It was printed for the first time in 1818 by the Marquis of Villarosa, along with Vico's original text, in a volume of Vico's *Opuscoli*. The *Raccolta* text, along with Vico's reflections and extensions of the continuation, are what has become known as Vico's autobiography in many successive editions that appear to the present day. Vico's autobiography covers events of his life and career to age sixty-three, by which time he had published his major works, including the first and second editions of *La Scienza nuova* (1725 and 1730). He was seeing the third edition, an editing of the second, through the press at his death in January 1744.

In the remarks that follow I wish to pursue three questions: (1) What are the key rhetorical and linguistic traits distinctive to the construction of Vico's narrative? (2) How does Vico's presentation of his own life connect to his *Scienza nuova*? and (3) What is the ultimate image of himself and his career that Vico wishes the reader to accept? No attempt will be made fully to summarize Vico's text, as it is a work of less than one hundred pages and is readily available in various Italian editions and in the reliable English translation by Fisch and Bergin<sup>1</sup>.

At the time of Vico, the term 'autobiography' did not exist in any European language. Calogerà, in his editorial preface to the first issue of the *Raccolta*, comments on the originality of such a text on one's own life. He reports that Lodoli coined the term '*periautografia*' from Greek, using the concept of *peri-* (around, what surrounds or encloses). Those who might respond to Porcìa's proposal and invitation were themselves to write, in their own terms, what surrounds their work and their discoveries, rather than to leave the task to others.

The inspiration for the project was a letter of 22 March 1714 from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz to Louis Bourget, commenting on the work of Conti and then saying: «Descartes would have us believe that he hardly read anything. That was a little too much. It is good to study the discoveries of others in a manner that exposes us to the source of their inventions and that renders them in a way our own». He emphasizes that he wishes that authors would give us the history of their discoveries, and concludes: «When they fail to do this, it is necessary to try to divine it, in order better to profit from

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<sup>1</sup> The reader will find a systematic analysis of Vico's text in D. P. Verene, *The New Art of Autobiography. An Essay on the Life of Giambattista Vico Written by Himself*, Oxford 1991. Much of my discussion above is a partial revision of my remarks on Vico's text in the second chapter of D. P. Verene, *Knowledge of Things Human and Divine: Vico's New Science and Finnegans Wake*, New Haven 2003. For an Italian text of Vico's autobiography see G. B. Vico, *Opere*, 2 vols., edited by A. Battistini, Milano 1990. English edition: *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, translated by M. H. Fisch and T. G. Bergin, Ithaca 1983.

their works»<sup>2</sup>. Porcià's proposal, in addition to elaborating on the manner in which those invited are to comply with the idea that Leibniz originally put forth, asks the authors to give the date and place of their birth and names of their parents, and to relate honestly all the occurrences of their life rendering it most admirable and most curious, that can be revealed to the readers, and to posterity, without affecting the author's good name.

Vico does not fully comply with these requirements. He disposes of them in his first sentence: «Signor Giambattista Vico, he was born in Naples in the year 1670 of upright parents who left behind them a very good reputation». He does not give the names of his parents or in any way say who they are. He says only they were *onesti parenti*. His description of his parents echoes Petrarca's phrase in his autobiographical *Epistle to Posterity*, describing his parents as *honestis parentibus*. In using Petrarca's phrase Vico may also have meant to imply what Petrarca says about his parents – that they were of middling means or, as he adds, that to tell the truth they were on the edge of poverty<sup>3</sup>.

Vico's first autobiographical act is to fabricate his own birth date, a key element of his first sentence. He claims it to be 1670. In fact he was born on June 23, 1668, the eve of the feastday of St. John the Baptist, for whom he was named. He was baptized the following day in the church of San Gennaro all'Olmo. The record of his baptism still exists in the parish book. His priest knew the date he was born, his family and friends knew it, the whole neighborhood knew it. He knew it. It is not a printer's error. In describing his defense of his father in a civil court case brought against him by another bookseller, Bartolomeo Moreschi, Vico gives his age as sixteen (*in età sedici anni*) in agreement with his 1670 birth date. Because this case is a matter in the public courts, its date can be independently established as June 20, 1686, three days before Vico's eighteenth birthday, as Nicolini has documented. Vico intends the reader to accept his birth date as 1670. He has puzzled all of his commentators and editors. Most editions of his autobiography have a footnote to the date in which they simply correct it, or say «more precisely 1668», or words to that effect. Commentators pass over it or remark on it as though it were insignificant.

The date of 1668 is uninteresting; it has no symbolic power. The date of 1670 is quite a different matter. By putting seventy into his birth date Vico has put his end in his beginning. Biblically the allotted lifespan is three score and ten years, which is also the ideal lifespan recognized in Greek medicine. Dante begins the *Divine Comedy* by saying that he is in the middle of life's journey, namely, that he is thirty-five years old. Vico, by his actual birth date, died at the age of seventy-five. The Bible says to live beyond seventy is not necessarily an advantage (Psalms 90). It is just before this age that Vico's health, always fragile, begins to fail. Seven is Vico's number. In the first half of his birth date, one and six are seven. Seven is a number of

<sup>2</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften G. W. Leibniz*, vol. 3, edited by C. J. Gerhardt, Hildesheim 1960, pp. 567–568. My translation.

<sup>3</sup> F. Petrarca, *Prose*, edited by G. Martellotti, Milano 1955, p. 6.

rhetorical significance, used as such by ancient historians. The number of cities conquered, the size of groups, ages of important figures, and so forth, are often given by ancient historians by variations on the number seven. There are seven hills of Rome, and Socrates is said to have died at the age of seventy. Vico uses his own birth date as a rhetorical device to reinforce his conception of history<sup>4</sup>.

A further feature of the sentence with which Vico begins his autobiography is his reference to himself in the third person, as Vico. He begins: «Il signor Giambattista Vico», which he follows with «egli è nato in Napoli» (lit. «he was born in Naples»). He refers to himself by his full name preceded by *signor*, and even more formally as *Il signor, il* being commonly placed before the name of a thinker or figure of note in scholarly or historical writing in Italian. He uses *il* before Vico subsequently in the text, as he does before the names of other important figures to whom he refers. By using this convention of language on himself, here and throughout his autobiography, Vico gains such distance that he becomes his own biographer. He stands alongside the reader, realizing the course of his own life. Biography is a basic form of historical writing, which Vico practiced in his *Life of Antonio Carafa*, and Vico now writes of himself as a historical figure. This adds to the sense that we are reading a true account of Vico's life.

Vico says that he will not feign «what Descartes craftily feigned [*che astutamente finse Renato Delle Carte*] as to the method of his studies [in the *Discourse*]». He says, «Rather, with the candor proper to a historian, we shall narrate plainly and step by step the entire series of Vico's studies, in order that the proper and natural causes of his particular development as a man of letters may be known». Vico does not feign what Descartes does, to claim to have made his discovery of the method of right reasoning in the sciences by a process of logical introspection accomplished on a single day. Vico does recount the history of his thought in a step-by-step manner, but his history is accommodated to the fable, the device of rhetoric and poetic, not logic. In this Vico is adopting a feature of Descartes' own rhetoric, where in the first part of the *Discourse*, he says it may be read as a 'fable' or an *histoire*.

In the 1731 continuation of his autobiography, Vico, reflecting on his earlier text published in the *Raccolta*, says: «And, as may be seen, he wrote it as a philosopher, meditating the causes, natural and moral, and the occasions of fortune [...] which was to demonstrate that his intellectual life was bound to have been such as it was and not otherwise». Vico's conception of history as 'ideal eternal' combines philosophy, which aims at universal principles, with philology, which aims at presenting the details, particular deeds, laws, languages, and customs. In the *New Science* Vico claims to show what providence has wrought in history. In his autobiography he claims to show what providence has wrought in his own history – the causes natural and moral and the occasions of fortune.

<sup>4</sup> A. Dreizehnter, *Die rhetorische Zahl: Quellenkritische Untersuchungen anhand der Zahlen 70 und 700*, Munich 1978.

For Vico, providence is a way to confront the alternatives of the 'deaf necessity' (*sorda necessità*) of the Stoics and the 'blind chance' (*cieco caso*) of the Epicureans. Providence as a metaphysical principle of history rejects both of these alternatives but unites their partial truths into a single principle. Providence or 'ideal eternal history' presents events as necessarily recurring in the cycle of three ages – gods, heroes, and humans – yet allows for the particulars of the life of any nation to remain unique. In Vico's life the causes natural and moral are interlocking and provide a comprehension of its overall pattern. The occasions of fortune are chance events unique to Vico's career. Vico's providence, in contrast to the Enlightenment concept of progress, and different from the Christian perception of history as a single drama with a final salvation and resurrection, is a *corso* and *ricorso* of fall and rebirth. Vico's *corso* is the cycle written into the life of all human events.

Vico's particular causes natural and moral and occasions of fortune are set within the three ages of his life. The first two ages fall within the originally published part of his autobiography. His first age is the period of his education that culminates with his appointment as professor of Latin eloquence at the University of Naples in 1699. In these years, especially until 1692, when he wrote his first surviving work, his poem *Affetti di un disperato* (*Feelings of one in despair*), Vico, like the first humans is ordering the world, attempting to acquire wisdom, a knowledge of things divine and human. His goal is self-knowledge, which he describes in his first oration as the attempt to go through the whole cycle of studies in the shortest possible time, and the whole, he says in his seventh oration, is really the flower of wisdom.

Once Vico had acquired his wisdom he was in a position to speak about it. He learned that his new appointment required him to give an inaugural oration to open the academic year. He devoted these early orations to pedagogy. In the same year (1699) of his first university oration Vico presented his oration *On the Sumptuous Dinners of the Romans* to the Palatine Academy in Naples. Vico advanced the original view that the Romans are to be understood not simply in terms of the grandeur of their political and military achievements but also in terms of their culture and its influence, which includes comprehension of the details of their daily life<sup>5</sup>. Vico was both philosopher and historian or philologist from the beginning. He was on his way to the formation of 'heroic mind,' which he described in 1732 in his oration with that title. The age of heroes in his own history takes the form of heroic thoughts. These culminated in the great heroic act of producing his *New Science* of 1725, the description of which ends the original text of his autobiography.

When Vico took up the continuation of his autobiography in 1731 he became a human, in the age of humans. He struggled to maintain his heroic stance, describing his development of the second version of the *New*

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<sup>5</sup> See D. P. Verene, *Vico and Culinary Art: On the Sumptuous Dinners of the Romans and the Science of the First Meals* and G. B. Vico, *On the Sumptuous Dinners of the Romans*, translated by G. A. Trone, in «New Vico Studies», 20, 2002.

*Science*, but ironically he increasingly becomes the modern professor. Much of the continuation shows Vico as involved in the barbarism of reflection of the third age of wit and solitude of the soul. In addition to an account of the difficulties involved in the publication of the second edition of the 1730 *New Science*, he describes commissions he received: to write, in a matter of days, a panegyric to Philip V, king of Spain, on his departure from Naples, and to write the inscriptions, emblems, mottoes, and account of the funeral rites for Carlo di Sangro and Giuseppe Capece, leaders of the conspiracy of Macchia. He writes of how magnificently these items were published. Vico must have realized the contrast between the grand format in which these were printed and the poor format in which the greatest discovery of his time was printed – his *New Science* of 1725.

Vico reports that on the counsel of Count Carlo Borromeo he composed the inscriptions for the funeral rites celebrated in Naples at the death of Emperor Joseph of Austria and that he was commanded by Cardinal Wolfgang von Schrottenbach, the viceroy of Naples, to compose the inscriptions for the funeral rites of the Empress Eleanor. As these were never put up, Vico quotes their texts in full. He also wrote numerous nuptial odes, *canzoni*, sonnets, and orations for various aristocrats, and prepared a court case for one. The fact that Vico reports all this, which has little to do with his intellectual life in any real sense, has baffled critics, who wonder why he engaged in such seeming braggadocian relations.

Vico has the courage to cast himself within the life of the third age. He is no heroic thinker when he is engaged in these tasks, nor is he so in his decision to include them. It would be like a thinker today, the author of great intellectual achievements, relating how honored he was to receive a request from the dean or university administration to lead a committee to report on the future of the university or to prepare a university self-study, which would be attractively printed and grandly circulated, then as is typically the case, quickly forgotten. Such documents have no deep meaning or lasting value. Only because Vico wrote them do the pieces he describes have any genuine interest. This is true of the minor writings of most great thinkers. The interesting point is Vico's inclusion of them in the story of his intellectual life.

For Vico the cycle is in everything. Vico's life as a total human event is a cycle of three ages, and the events within it are smaller cycles. The cycle is the idea of birth, maturity, and end, and of every end being a new beginning. The course of every day and every event is a circle.

Vico calls St. Augustine his 'particular protector'<sup>6</sup>. In his discussion of the number seven in the *City of God*, Augustine cites Proverbs 24:16: «For a righteous man falls seven times and rises again; but the wicked are overthrown by calamity». The first event of Vico's life, that he describes on the first page of his autobiography, is his fall headfirst from a ladder, which he claims transformed his temperament from that of a cheerful child to that

<sup>6</sup> G.B. Vico, *L'autobiografia, il carteggio e le poesie varie*, edited by B. Croce and F. Nicolini, 2nd rev. ed., in Id., *Opere di G. B. Vico*, vol. 5, Bari 1929, p. 377.

of the melancholy of a thinker. Vico's fall from the ladder is his first fall. His rise from it came after the three years that, he reports, were required for his recovery. His fall involves all three of the factors that he says he will relate. There are natural causes for his survival; these are the deep lancements the surgeon performed to relieve the pressure of blood in the tumor that formed from his fracture. There is the moral cause of the grace of God. The fall itself is an occasion of fortune. It is an accident, a chance event, but it is providential in that it formed Vico's nature as a thinker; otherwise he might have become an ordinary person, simply the combined product of his parents.

Vico's second fall came when he returned to school. During his convalescence he studied at home and began to experience his ability to become his own teacher. This experience foreshadows the fact that Vico later became an autodidact, spending little time in his formative years in academic institutions. No one could teach Vico anything. When he returned to the grammar school his ability was beyond that of the other pupils. His teacher recommended that he enter the 'humanity' curriculum in the school of the Jesuit fathers. There the teacher pitted him against the three best pupils in the 'diligences,' or extraordinary scholastic exercises.

Vico reports that he humbled the first of the three, the second fell ill in attempting to emulate him, and the third was passed into the next grade by privilege of proficiency before the list was read. Vico recognized this promotion of the third competitor as an insult and withdrew from the school to study Emmanuele Alvarez's work on grammar on his own. He mastered this and moved on to logic and philosophy, but he nearly ruined his mind by studying these topics at too young an age. He fell into despair and deserted his studies for a year and a half. In his autobiography he comments: «So dangerous it is to put youths to the study of the sciences that are beyond their age!».

After this period of convalescence from his self-induced fall Vico returned to the Jesuit school to hear Father Giuseppe Ricci lecture on metaphysics, but he decided he could learn more on his own; he returned home to study the *Metaphysics* of Francisco Suárez. After a year he went to the university to hear Don Felice Aquadia lecture on civil institutes, and for two months he attended the lectures of Don Francesco Verde on cases in both civil and canon law. But he decided he was learning nothing from Verde and returned home to study law on his own. At this time, Vico says, the views of his *Study Methods* and his *Universal Law* had begun to take shape in his mind.

His health became endangered by tuberculosis, and the family resources had been sorely reduced. Vico, having risen from the injustice of the treatment he received in his early attempt at schooling, was now about to lose any result that his work might have produced. Then he met with an occasion of fortune – in a bookstore he became engaged in conversation with Monsignor Geronimo Rocca, bishop of Ischia and a distinguished jurist. The conversation concerned the right method for teaching jurisprudence,

with the result that the bishop became so impressed that he urged Vico to take a position of tutor to his nephews at the Rocca family castle in Vatolla, in the Cilento. Vico accepted this position both for financial reasons and for his health, the countryside and mountain air being a better environment for recovery from tuberculosis than the congested city of Naples. Vatolla is a village three days' carriage ride south of Naples, in the mountains that rise up from the gulf of Salerno, the famous Amalfi coast.

Vico found himself, in Vatolla, in not only a kind of Elysium of nature but also, for an autodidact, an Elysium of the mind. He had access to a good library in the Franciscan convent of Santa Maria della Pietà (on a visit, Nicolini found the library still had three hundred volumes, although much the worse from years of infestation of mice.) With such a resource at his disposal Vico could complete his advanced education. There exist photographs of a large tree under which Vico is thought to have sat to read these books – an idyll of scholarly study. Vico remained in the Rocca family for nine years, from the age of eighteen to twenty-seven. He had very friendly relations with Don Domenico Rocca, who shared his taste in poetry and treated him like a son. During this period Vico made occasional visits to Naples, accompanying the family, who had residences in Naples and at Portici, on the Bay of Naples.

If Vico set about to heal himself physically at Vatolla, he also formed a program of improvement of his spirit. Prior to going to Vatolla, he reports, he was wedded to a corrupt style of poetry. This was the baroque style of the day (*barocchismo*). To cure this Vico developed a method of reading at Vatolla; he turned to the cultivation of the Tuscan tongue, from which derives what is now known as Standard Italian, the language in which he later wrote the *New Science*. To do so he read the classic Tuscan authors alongside those of classical Latin. On successive days he read the prose of Cicero side by side with that of Boccaccio, the poetry of Virgil with Dante, and Horace with Petrarca. He read these three sets of authors three times each, the first time to grasp the composition as a whole, the second to note the transitions and sequences of things, and the third to collect their fine turns of thought and expression. The key to this method is not mentioned explicitly, but it is the three classical rhetorical principles of composition: *inventio*, the gathering of materials, *dispositio*, their ordering or arrangement, and *elocutio*, their formulation in language.

These are natural principles, used by any author and orator in the production of written texts or speeches. Vico has taken these principles employed in the composition of these works and made them principles of their comprehension by the reader. He says that he marked the turns of phrase in the books themselves rather than copying them into a commonplace or phrase book, as was standard practice for students and scholars of the day. This very modern procedure, Vico says, allowed him to recall the phrases in context. In the *New Science* of 1730, in a passage not included in the 1744 edition, Vico advises the reader to read the passage three times. He does not, in this note to the reader, specify the principles guiding each of the three times. He may have assumed that a threefold reading of anything



would naturally fall into a sequence of reading for the whole, then for the transitions, and finally for the phrases and modes of expression.

The result of Vico's cure is his first published poem, *Affetti di un disperato*, dedicated to Don Domenico Rocca. The poem is filled with Lucretian sentiments, not Christian. Vico does not mention it in his autobiography, although it appeared in 1693 while he was at Vatolla. He also makes no mention of the fact that in 1692, when he wrote the poem, his friends Giacinto de Cristofaro, Nicola Galizia, and Basilio Giannelli were stigmatized by the Inquisition, and that in the following year they were condemned and imprisoned. It is not possible to understand Vico's work unless one takes into account that the Inquisition was operating throughout his career in Naples. Vico was very probably in deep sympathy with his friends. They confessed to views that there were men before Adam, who were composed of atoms like all the animals, and that these men formed societies and had a pantheon of gods. Vico himself underwent a religious crisis at Vatolla that quite probably concerned such points. The influence of Lucretius, especially the fifth book of *On the Nature of Things*, can be seen in the *New Science*, regarding the origin of language and human society.

What was the result of Vico's religious crisis? He does not mention it in the autobiography, but it likely was twofold. One result was in a doctrine of origins, to separate sacred from profane history. Thus the features of preadamite man became, in Vico's later works, those of the giants and founders of the first families of the gentile nations. Second, Vico realized that the Inquisition and the politics of Catholic doctrine had serious consequences for intellectual inquiry once one found oneself in clerical disfavor. The solution for Vico was to befriend the clergy. Once back in Naples this is exactly what he did, to the extent that later in life he was accused by his detractors of having a steady stream of clergy going in and out of his home.

Throughout the *New Science* Vico declares that its principles are all for the greater glory of the Christian religion. He repeats this almost as an oath at various points throughout the work. Vico, in his twenties, from his distance in Vatolla, saw that the problem was not religion but the clergy. If Vico could cultivate a fraternal relation to the clergy his ideas would not seem a threat. He understood the ancient problem of the philosopher and the *polis*. Vico's own religion, although coming from Christianity, not Judaism, may have been close to that of Spinoza, whom Vico never refutes at any length but whom he regards as a man without public religion. The clergy, as the Neapolitan historian Pietro Giannone showed, were the new *polis*. For his criticism of the papacy and his account of how the church had come to have dominance over civil government in his great *Civil History of the Kingdom of Naples* (1723), Giannone was sentenced to ten years of imprisonment and lifelong exile from Naples.

Like Socrates, Vico could claim to be no enemy of public religion. Neapolitan Catholicism was a civil religion, and Vico had no quarrel with its observances. Vico reports that on resuming residence in Naples he was

questioned by Father Don Gaetano d'Andrea, a Theatine, and invited to enter his order. Vico very carefully and diplomatically rejected his offer on the spot and, as he reports, the father closed the conversation by saying it «is not your vocation». In a letter to Father Bernardo Maria Giacco in 1720 Vico writes that errors of his early years are remembered in Naples and used against him<sup>7</sup>. He does not say what these errors were, but he may have harbored a fear that his early religious doubts could be held against him in some form.

Having acquired a full education on his own, Vico had risen mightily from the injustice he experienced in his early attempt at a course of formal education. He returned from Vatolla to Naples only to find that, in Odyssean fashion, the house of human knowledge was full of suitors. The suitors in this case were followers of Cartesianism. Vico describes this in a biblical style: «With this learning and erudition Vico returned to Naples a stranger in his own land, and found the physics of Descartes at the height of its renown among the established men of letters». He says that Aristotle had become a laughingstock. The culture and learning of the Renaissance that had based itself in the wisdom of the ancients was seen as completely outmoded. The study of rhetoric had been put aside, and the study of the fundamentals of jurisprudence had fallen into decline. Vico realized that he must chart his own course, «for in the city taste in letters changed every two or three years like styles in dress». Because of his attention to the humanities and the ancients and to the mastery of Latin, Vico says he «lived in his native city not only a stranger but quite unknown». He was glad he had sworn allegiance to no teacher so he was free to follow his own good genius. It was what he had relied on all along, and at this point it was all he had.

Vico's return to the modern world of the Cartesians and to anonymity is a third fall. He descends from the Elysium of Vatolla to the banality of the city. Nicolini calls this Vico's *fictio*, because he acts as though he had had no contact with the intellectual climate of Naples while in the Cilento. He returns a *straniero* in his own *patria*, a stranger in a strange land that is in fact his own. Since the Rocca family moved between its three residences, probably on a seasonal cycle, Vico would have made many trips to Naples. In fact he matriculated at the University of Naples at Salerno during those years and received a doctorate in both canon and civil law in 1694, a year before his permanent return to Naples.

Once it is realized that, from the first sentence of his autobiography, Vico is constructing a fable of himself to convey the poetic truth of his own life, the *fictio* of his return is no surprise. But this *fictio* surrounding the sojourn at Vatolla may have a further dimension. Perhaps it was actually nine years that he spent in his self-education in the Cilento, but it is also a significant number with regard to Descartes' claim, in the third part of the *Discourse*, that he spent nine years roaming «about the world, trying to be a spectator rather than an actor in all the comedies that are played out

<sup>7</sup> G.B. Vico, *A Bernardo Maria Giacco* (October 12, 1720), in Id., *Epistole con aggiunte le epistole dei suoi corrispondenti*, edited by M. Sanna, Naples 1992, pp. 88–90.

there». Descartes says he spent this time in effect becoming a modern, that is, developing his powers of rational introspection, skepticism, and doubt. Vico spent the same length of time acquiring the wisdom of the ancients.

In 1697, aged twenty-nine, Vico unsuccessfully attempted to secure a city clerkship. His older brother Giuseppe was a notary. A year later Vico competed successfully to obtain a chair of rhetoric; he assumed this position at the university at the age of thirty-one. He held it nearly to the end of his life (1699–1741); from his fall into anonymity he rose to some prominence. The year he obtained his chair he married Teresa Caterina Destito and moved into a proper house that had several rooms, a terrace, and a garden, in Vicolo dei Giganti. His first child, Luisa, was born in 1700.

Vico delivered six inaugural orations, marking the beginning of the university's year, between 1699 and 1707. The seventh inaugural oration, of 1708, became a small book, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, published a year later. It was Vico's first book. In 1710 Vico published *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, the first book, a metaphysics, of a work that was to have a second book, on physics, which was partially realized in his essay *On the Equilibrium of Animate Bodies*, and a third book, on ethics, which never materialized. The tree of knowledge that Descartes describes in the author's letter to the *Principles* culminates in an ethics that Descartes never wrote. Now that he had his position Vico was prepared to answer the Cartesian suitor who would take over and destroy the Republic of Letters.

At the end of 1722, upon the death of its holder, Domenico Campanile, the first morning chair of law became vacant. Vico, now fifty-four, could improve his salary and his position if he were selected for it. He turned his attention to qualifying for this important chair. He had been preparing for this possibility for several years because of a number of standing vacancies in the law faculty. In 1719 Vico had delivered his inaugural oration on universal law, a portion of which survives quoted in his autobiography. This was followed in 1720 through 1722 with the synopsis and three books of his *Universal Law*, a work larger in size than the *New Science* and one that stands as an early formulation of both the content and the principles of the *New Science*. In the period leading up to his work on *Universal Law* Vico had begun to formulate the conception of his 'four authors.' In his study of the ancients he had arrived at Plato and Tacitus as the two thinkers he most admired. Between them they commanded a knowledge of how man actually is (Tacitus) and how man should be (Plato). He concluded that the wise man should be formed of both the esoteric wisdom of Plato and the common or vulgar wisdom of Tacitus.

Vico then discovered the thought of Bacon, which was both common and esoteric. He now proposed to have these three unique authors ever before him in meditation and writing. They became his guides. In writing his *Life of Antonio Carafa* (1716) to secure a dowry for his daughter Luisa, he read Hugo Grotius's *On the Law of War and Peace*. He added Grotius as his fourth author. He was impressed with Bacon's vision of the total of human knowledge, but Bacon does not have a sufficient doctrine of laws or

of the course of all nations. Grotius, Vico says, embraces in the system of universal law the whole of philosophy and philology and the history of facts and events joined with the three learned languages of antiquity, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Vico's four authors form a square that brings together ancients and moderns and offers a total view of the human world. The square is made up of two pagans and two heretics.

The fourth fall of Vico is his loss of the concourse for the morning chair of law in 1723. This loss and his initial fall at the age of seven are the two most decisive events of his life. Vico was fifty-five. He was the ideal candidate to win the competition. He had prepared for it with his grand *Universal Law*, built upon his interpretation of Roman law. The topic from Roman law on which he chose to prepare his lecture, from among the topics offered by the prefect in charge of the examination, was on a difficult passage from the *Digest*, but one he had mastered. Vico says he wrote his lecture, working on it all night, until five o'clock in the morning, «in the midst of the conversation of friends and the cries of his children, as his custom was, whether reading, writing, or thinking». Unlike the solitude in which Descartes wrote in his *poêle*, his stove-heated chamber, Vico wrote in his kitchen. He felt he had spoken brilliantly at the concourse. But the next day, as he distributed copies of his lecture, he was warned that he would not win, and on the advice of Domenico Caravita, a prominent attorney, Vico withdrew his name from competition.

Although Vico does not report this in his autobiography, the chair was awarded to Domenico Gentile of Bari, a notorious seducer of servant girls, who committed suicide over one of them in 1739, sixteen years later, and whose only book was withdrawn from the press for plagiarism. The injustice of this decision was foreshadowed by the injustice of the decision not to advance Vico in grammar school. In both cases a much lesser person was put ahead of Vico. He reports that the loss of the concourse «made him despair of ever holding a worthier position in his native city». Vico's despair stretches from his despair about life generally, expressed in the poem *Affetti di un disperato*, to his despair at his loss of the concourse. His work, it seemed, had been for nothing.

Although Vico despaired of ever obtaining a university position that reflected the level of his learning and abilities, he took some consolation in a review of his *Universal Law* by Jean Le Clerc, the editor of *Bibliothèque ancienne et moderne*, to whom he had sent a copy. Le Clerc did not really understand the work, but he perceived its originality. Le Clerc had written Vico a kind letter when he received the book, saying that he would review it and that it would show the Northern scholars «that more learned and acute things are being said by Italians than can be hoped for from dwellers in colder climes». Throughout his career Vico desired approval and recognition of his work by the scholars of Northern Europe, but this review from Le Clerc was all the positive public attention from the North that he would ever receive. In his review, which appeared in 1722, Le Clerc said that Vico's treatment of law was constructed by a «mathematical method» that «from few principles

draws infinite consequences». This claim to a mathematical method Vico carried over into his *New Science*. Le Clerc also said that in Vico's work there was «a continuous mingling of philosophical, juridical and philological matters». This is also a procedure that runs throughout the *New Science*.

Vico reports that after the blow of defeat in the concourse he did not even suspend his labors. He began immediately to accomplish his own next resurrection, the publication of the *First New Science* (1725). He announces this claim in providential terms: he says that «Vico was born for the glory of his native city [*patria*] and therefore of Italy (since, being born there and not in Morocco, he became a scholar [*letterato*])». The meaning of Vico's contrast of Italy with Morocco is passed over by most of his commentators. An exception is Andrea Battistini, who writes that the contraposition of Italy and Morocco could be taken as an analogy with Descartes' claim, in the third part of the *Discourse*, that in formulating his provisional moral code he decided first to

obey the laws and customs of my country [...] and although there may be men as sensible among the Persians or Chinese as among ourselves, I thought it would be most useful for me to be guided by those with whom I should have to live<sup>8</sup>.

To hold to his own *patria*, customs, and traditions is especially important to Vico because of the importance he attaches to the communal sense of humanity and to the vulgar wisdom of the nations, as against the modern tendency to abstract the general human condition from social context.

Even if Vico had Descartes' comment in mind, why does he choose Morocco as his contrasting country? In the «Poetic Geography» of the *New Science* Vico says that «within Greece itself, accordingly, lay the original East called Asia or India, the West called Europe or Hesperia, the North called Thrace or Scythia, and the South called Libya or Mauretania». He claims these names for the regions of Greece were later applied to the world at large; for example

they gave the name Hesperia to the western part of Greece, where the evening star Hesperus comes out in the fourth quarter of the horizon. Later they saw Italy in the same quarter much larger than the Hesperia of Greece, and they called it Hesperia Magna.

His use of Morocco may be intended as a symbol for Africa as an opposite to Europe, *Mauretania* being the Roman term for Morocco and Libya and in its transferred meaning having the possibility of signifying Africa. Tacitus, one of Vico's four authors, in his *History* describes Mauretania and the Roman possessions of Africa as «given to civil strife and sudden disturbances because of the fanaticism and superstition of its inhabitants, ignorant as they are of laws and unacquainted with civil magistrates».

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<sup>8</sup> G. B. Vico, *Opere*, cit., vol. 2, p. 1295.

Morocco symbolizes a society in which a hero can emerge and embody virtues in his deeds, but in such a society a philosopher or scholar (*letterato*) would not arise. Vico, because he is part of the third age of the particular *ricorso* of Western history into which he was born, can become a 'heroic mind.' Vico speaks of himself as a hero in this sense in his letter to Father Giacco in 1725, regarding the appearance of the *First New Science*: «This work has filled me with a certain heroic spirit»<sup>9</sup>. He says he is no longer troubled by any fear of death or by the need to confront rivals. In the third age one cannot glorify one's *patria* by great deeds because it is an age of reflection and the rule of written law. One can achieve such glorification only by a heroism of thought, a new discovery that can govern our comprehension of science and virtue.

Just as Vico is righteously rising from his fall in the concourse, declaring himself, not for the glory of the university but for the glory of Naples and Italy, he experiences a fifth fall, one from which he recovers quickly but not painlessly. By the end of 1724 Vico had finished the major part of what he later called the *New science in negative form*. When he sent the draft of the first two-thirds of his autobiography to Porcì he anticipated that his great discovery of the new science would soon be in print. He sent this portion of the autobiography through Porcì's agent in Rome, Abbé Giuseppe Luigi Esperti, who sent it on to Porcì on Vico's fifty-seventh birthday (June 23, 1725). The cost of the publication of Vico's *New Science* was to be underwritten by Cardinal Lorenzo Corsini, to whom it was dedicated, and the text had received its imprimatur on July 15, 1725. But on July 20 Vico received a letter from the Cardinal, saying that because of unusual expenses he had incurred on a visit to the diocese of Frascati he was unable to support the printing costs. No indication was given of the specific nature of these costs or their cause, but it was clear to Vico that if the work were to be printed he would have to find the means personally. He could not afford the cost of printing such a large manuscript, but he says he felt honor bound to publish it.

The withdrawal of financial support by Corsini was a great hardship, but it was also an act of providence. In order to afford the printing, Vico recast the entire work in a positive form, during the heat of August and part of September, greatly reducing its size. To finance the costs he sold a family ring «set with a five-grain diamond of the purest water». He retained the dedication to Cardinal Corsini and included an inscription addressed to the universities of Europe, once again hoping for northern recognition. Vico's decision to retain the dedication to Corsini was not only gracious but also prudent, for later Corsini became Pope Clement XII, and Vico dedicated the *Second New Science* to him as pope. Because the manuscript of the *New science in negative form* is lost there is no knowledge of its precise contents. It was likely an extended series of criticisms of the views of the seventeenth-century natural-law theorists, with a subtext of Vico's own view. In recasting

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<sup>9</sup> G. B. Vico, *A Bernardo Maria Giacco* (October 25, 1725), cit., pp. 113–115.

it into positive form Vico inverted this structure, expanding the themes of his own view of the life of nations and retaining as critical passages much from his attacks on the natural-law theorists. This is the character of the text he published at the press of Felice Mosca in Naples in October 1725.

In December Vico drafted the pages of the final third of the original text of his autobiography, which he would send to Porcia, along with corrections of the first part, two years later, in 1728. The pages drafted in December after the appearance of the *First New Science* are a summary of its major themes. Vico says that in it «he discovers new historical principles of philosophy, and first of all a metaphysics of the human race». He ends his original autobiography with a quotation from a letter from Cardinal Corsini, saying that the *First New Science* shows «that there still lives in Italian spirits today a native and peculiar gift for Tuscan eloquence». Corsini concludes: «I congratulate upon it the fatherland that it so adorns». Corsini's letter is perhaps what suggested to Vico his claim of existing for the glory of his native city and of Italy. It also points to the fact that Vico wrote the *New Science* in Italian, or the Tuscan language of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarca. Had he won the concourse he might have continued to write in Latin, the language of university academics in which he had delivered his inaugural orations and written his early works, the *Ancient Wisdom* and *Universal Law*.

In his letter to Father Giacco on October 25, 1725, Vico says, as I mentioned earlier, that he feels «filled with a certain heroic spirit», but also that he feels himself a «new man». This is a secular conversion experience, almost as profound as St. Augustine's conversion and baptism at Milan. Augustine leaves the university for a new life. Vico remains in the university but is no longer *of* it. It was a major step for Vico to write in Tuscan, for in his reading program at Vatolla he had concluded that Latin was a finer language. He also reports that he confined his study of Greek to a basic knowledge of *Gester's Rudiments* and that he turned from studying other languages, such as French, in order to master Latin, which he claims he knew as if it were his own tongue. For his *New Science* Vico required a modern language<sup>10</sup>.

Hume said of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, which like Vico's *New Science* is a work aimed at a science of human custom, that it «fell dead-born from the press»<sup>11</sup>. Vico could say the same of his master work, and, in effect, he does so. In the same letter to Father Giacco in which he says he

<sup>10</sup> Vico likely minimizes his involvement with other languages in order to emphasize his mastery and use of Latin. Because of the years of Spanish rule of Naples and his position in the intellectual life of the city, Vico, like others in the university, would have had a command of Spanish. Having studied *Gester's Rudiments* he would have had more than a passing knowledge of Greek, and he would have read French, the language in which Descartes' *Discourse* was written (although in 1644 a Latin translation was published in Amsterdam). In the seventh oration Vico discusses the difference between the French and Italian languages, saying that French is suited by nature to abstract ideas whereas Italian constantly evokes images. See G.B. Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, translated by E. Gianturco, Ithaca 1990, pp. 39–40.

<sup>11</sup> D. Hume, *My Own Life*, in Id., *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by C. W. Hendel, Indianapolis 1955, p. 4.

feels like a new man, he says that as he goes about his business in Naples he attempts to avoid embarrassing encounters with those to whom he has sent a copy of his book. They gave him no sign of even having received it. His would be a voice in a desert because, as he describes in this and other correspondence discussing the reception, or lack of it, of the *New Science*, he regards the intellectual and cultural climate of Naples to have become hollow, without respect for wisdom or eloquence. This is the result of the invasion of the modern versions of Stoicism and Epicureanism, beginning with the attraction to Cartesianism. Vico also had no response from the thinkers of the North. Some of this was simply due to bad luck. He had sent a copy to Le Clerc but received no reply; Le Clerc was too advanced in years to continue such scholarly exchange. Vico also sent a copy to Newton, who may have received it about a year before his death.

In August 1727 there appeared in the book notices of a prominent publication in Leipzig, the *Acta eruditorum*, a false and malicious announcement of Vico's *New Science*. Among other things, it said, on the authority of an Italian friend, that the author of the work was an abbé of the Vico family, and it went on to distort the subject matter of the book. The notice was not signed; apparently the *Acta* had assumed it genuine and published it as received. Now Vico was made a mockery before the whole world, and especially before the very scholars of the North whose approval he had always sought. He wrote a reply, referred to as *Vici vindiciae*, in which he challenges the book notice word for word, including a digression on wit and humor and the half-animal nature of laughing men. Vico addressed the anonymous author of the notice as 'Unknown vagabond' (*Ignotus erro*). He recommended this person «take his departure from the world of men and go and live with the wild beasts in the African desert». Vico may have intended this to have a resonance with Descartes' comment, in the third part of the *Discourse*, that he had «been able to lead a life as solitary and withdrawn as if I were in the most remote desert».

Vico may have thought the author of the book notice to have been Giannone, who was no friend of Vico and was then in exile in Vienna – hence Vico's term, 'Unknown vagabond'<sup>12</sup>. The author of the malicious notice, however, was probably Vico's colleague Nicolà Capasso, who sent it to the Leipzig *Acta* in collaboration with other colleagues. Throughout Vico's career Capasso was his *grande tormentatore*. It was Capasso, a versifier in dialect and writer of macaronic poetry, and most likely a trivial punster, who gave Vico the cruel nickname «Mastro Tisicuzzo» (*tisico* = tubercular), an antique slur that captured Vico's gaunt, skin-and-bones appearance. Capasso may also have known that Vico had earlier suffered from tuberculosis. It was Capasso who, on looking into the *New Science*, is said to have run to Nicola Cirillo, a noted physician in Naples, to have his pulse taken, saying that he felt he might have suffered a stroke that had

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<sup>12</sup> The animosity between Vico and Giannone likely derived from a treatise against Giannone's *Civil History*, written by Vico's friend G. N. Torno, who was the ecclesiastical censor for most of Vico's books.



taken all reason from him. On being told of this, Vico replied that he had not written the book for «*pei poetuzzi*» (petty little poets).

Vico had friends as well as enemies in the Naples of his time, such as the prominent mathematician and metaphysician Paolo Mattia Doria, to whom Vico dedicated *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*. In addition to his professorship at the university Vico was a member of several academies that conducted the real intellectual life of Naples, the Uniti, the Medinaceli (before which the skin-and-bones figure of Vico delivered his oration *On the Sumptuous Dinners of the Romans*), and the Assorditi, and, late in life, he was *custode* of the Academy of Oziosi, at which he delivered his oration *Academies and the Relation of Philosophy and Eloquence*. In 1710 he was elected to the Arcadia of Rome. He was commissioned to appraise the library of Giuseppe Valletta, the greatest single collection of books in Naples. Vico was recognized by major figures in the intellectual life of Venice and Northern Italy, such as Lodoli, Conti, and Porcia, who, as I mentioned earlier, were behind the invitations to Vico and other prominent scholars in Italy and Naples to write their autobiographies.

These three figures were impressed with Vico's *New Science* of 1725 and wished to reprint it in a new, revised edition in Venice, which was an important center for publishing and a crossroads for intellectual exchange between Northern Europe and Italy. Vico, who, as he says, was not in the habit of visiting the post office, learned of this interest in letters, from each of the three scholars, that had been waiting for him there for a good part of a year. Vico was honored by their request, but from the start he was uneasy about dealing with the Venetians and the Venetian printers. He was about to experience his seventh fall.

Lodoli had indicated in his letter that Vico could include in the new edition of the *New Science* any additions or corrections he wished to make. Vico offered Lodoli «a manuscript of nearly a thousand pages, in which he had set about proving his *Principles* by a negative method». This was the original manuscript of the *New science in negative form*. He intended this to be added to the *New Science*. He tried to pass it off onto Lodoli, but Lodoli returned it. Vico reports that Don Giulio Torno and other prominent persons in Naples had wanted to publish the work, «but Vico dissuaded him by pointing out that the principles had already been established by the positive method». Apparently Vico was testing the firmness of Lodoli's judgment. Finally, in October 1729, Lodoli received Vico's revised manuscript of the *New Science*; it was nearly six hundred pages long.

At this point, Vico says, he began to dislike the attitude of the Venetian printer assigned to the work, and he demanded the return of the entire manuscript. It does not appear that the printer acted badly in any extreme way toward Vico. A file on Vico recently discovered in the Archives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith shows that the Venetian edition of the *New Science* was blocked in 1729 by the Holy Office<sup>13</sup>. If Vico knew this,

<sup>13</sup> See G. Costa, Review of *Dalla cronologia alla metafisica della mente* by C. Castellani, in «*New Vico Studies*», 18, 2000, p. 105.

he gives no indication of it in his autobiography. He began arrangements to have the edition printed in Naples. Once again the cost of printing became an obstacle. Because of the large size of the manuscript Vico could not find a publisher willing to take on the cost. This was an act of providence parallel to that which had earlier caused Vico to rewrite the *New science in negative form*. He now devised a similar plan to resurrect the revised book by completely rewriting it as a new whole. This meant he had to meditate and rewrite the work in the course of its printing. Vico says: «An almost fatal fury drove him to meditate and write it so rapidly, indeed, that he began it Christmas morning [1729] and finished it at nine o'clock Easter Sunday evening [April 9, 1730]».

Vico produced the definitive version of his *New Science* of 1730 in little more than three months, the amount of time it would take physically to write by hand so many pages. As Vico produced these pages, he passed them to the printer in Naples. He began the work by printing the exchange of letters he had had with Lodoli justifying his position in withdrawing the edition for Venice. After more than half of the volume had been printed Vico received a communication from Venice that caused him to abandon this *Novella letteraria*. The elimination of the letters created the absence of eighty-six pages already set in type and printed. Vico quickly commissioned a *dipintura*, an emblematic engraving or frontispiece, and wrote an explanation of it entitled *The Idea of the Work*. This was printed in larger type than was the following text, to fill the space. By the stroke of providence the reader is spared what surely would have been a very dated and dreary set of correspondence, of complaints and replies, and in its place are some of the best passages of the *New Science*.

During this period, Vico reports, he was suffering from a long, serious illness following an epidemic of grippe, as well as from the solitude in which he says he lived. Vico is constantly a victim of his body<sup>14</sup>. It is the source of the only personal details that he reports. The fall on his head changed his life. He went to Vatolla to cure his tuberculosis. While writing the biography of Carafa he was «wracked by the cruelest hypochondriac cramps in the left arm». He reports that at the time of the false book notice he was undergoing treatment for a gangrenous ulcer of the throat. After the publication of the second version of the *New Science* he was suffering from «a strange disease devouring all the tissues between the palate and the lower bone of the head». There is a sad irony in the fact that Vico, born in the street of San Biagio, St. Blasius, known for cures of the throat, should have been so afflicted.

The one portrait of Vico, done when he was in his sixties by Francesco Solimena, the painter of the great frescoes in the church of the Gesù Nuovo in Naples, shows him as a stern figure with an adust complexion. Vico's first

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<sup>14</sup> Z. Hanafi, *Vico's Monstrous Body*, in Id., *The Monster in the Machine: Magic, Medicine, and the Marvelous in the Time of the Scientific Revolution*, Durham, N.C., 2000, pp. 135–186.

biographer, Nicola Solla, describes him as tending to be adust («*l'abito del corpo adusto*»), one of the classic signs of a melancholy personality<sup>15</sup>.

Vico was constantly revising. He wrote a set of annotations to the *New Science* even while he was rewriting and printing it. He wrote a second set immediately after its publication and then went on to write a third set of notes, in August 1731. He rewrote the first set into a fourth set in 1733 or 1734. These revisions he regarded as the basis of a third edition of the *New Science*. He was seeing the third edition through the press when he died, during the night of January 22–23, 1744. But these revisions remain unincorporated.

Vico says that his temperament was «choleric to a fault» and that he often responded too strongly and publicly to his rivals<sup>16</sup>. He says that «among the caitiff semi-learned or pseudo-learned, the more shameless called him a fool [*pazzo*], or in somewhat more courteous terms they said that he was obscure or eccentric and had odd ideas». Although Vico does not report what was actually said about him, he has not simply invented this. Among surviving examples from the «caitiff semi-learned» (*cattivi dotti*) is Finetti's tale (1768) of having heard from a Neapolitan of noble birth who had been a student and follower of Vico for many years that «until a certain time Vico was regarded by the Neapolitans as a truly learned man, but later because of his extravagant opinions he was generally held to be a fool [*pazzo*]». When Finetti then asked him what was thought of the *New Science*, he replied, «Oh! by then he had become completely mad [*pazzo*]»<sup>17</sup>.

Vico ends his autobiography with the claim that through these responses to these adversities and detractors he had finally been led to the discovery of the *New Science*. He concludes the autobiography with a quotation from *Socrates to His Friends*, from the *Fabulae* of Phaedrus: «If I were consigned his fame, I would not shun to die as he, and because I would be acquitted when I became ashes, I would endure the inequity of the sentence». Vico must have chosen this final quotation very carefully. He says that having discovered the new science he felt himself more fortunate than Socrates, of whom Phaedrus «made this magnanimous wish» (*fece quel magnanimo voto*), the force of which is not quite so clear in the rendering of the Fisch and Bergin translation.

Vico, writing this in his early sixties, is taking his readers ahead to his own death. He feels, as he says in his description of the *Second New Science*, that he has succeeded in placing in one book all of his thought. He says that the *First New Science* and the *Universal Law* should be consulted

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<sup>15</sup> R. Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 3 vol., London, 1893, II: 4; G.B. Vico, *L'autobiografia, il carteggio e le poesie varie*, cit., vol. 5, p. 133. Solimena's portrait survives only in a copy commissioned by Villarosa; the original was destroyed by fire in 1819.

<sup>16</sup> An example of this temperament is Vico's address to his readers that survives from a lost draft of his *Il diritto universale*, written in 1720, in which he attacks his potential critics as incapable of truly comprehending his work. See D. P. Verene, *Vico's Address to His Readers, from a Lost Manuscript on Jurisprudence: Comment and Translation*, in «New Vico Studies», 19, 2001, pp. 161–168.

<sup>17</sup> G.B. Vico, *L'autobiografia*, cit., p. 129.

only for several passages; these remain important for their statements of particular discoveries (three chapters in the former concerning Vico's idea of the possibility of a common mental language for all nations and his discussions in the *Universal Law* of the Law of the Twelve Tables and of Tribonian's fable of the «Royal Law»). The *Second New Science*, then, is a whole thought, a book of wisdom.

The context of the full fable of *Socrates to His Friends* should not be missed. The lines Vico quotes are present in it as an aside, parenthetically stated. Phaedrus's fables have themes, like those of Aesop; the theme of this fable is friendship, that «the name of a friend is common; but fidelity is rarely found». Socrates is come upon having laid a foundation for a small house and is asked why someone as famous as himself is building such a small house. He replies: «I *only* wish that I could fill it with real friends». Only if this is understood is it clear why Vico compares himself to Socrates. His comparison is with the Socrates of the fable and is a continuation of his foregoing remarks on his status and treatment in his native city. Phaedrus frequently retorts to his own detractors in his fables, and resignation or pessimism is traditionally ascribed to his personality. The melancholic temper that Vico says he acquired as his nature from his fall at the age of seven makes a complete circle to the end.

What may be concluded regarding my original three questions? (1) Vico's text reads easily, giving the reader the impression that Vico is simply telling his life story. But if we assume some reflective distance from his narrative we realize that Vico has formed a fable of himself, beginning with his alteration of his birth date. By referring to himself always as Vico or in the third person, he becomes his own biographer, giving his text a sense of objectivity. The events of his life are presented in a providential pattern of fall and rise, echoing his fall and rise described on his first page. Finally, in his conclusion to his continuation, he appears as the modern Socrates in the new polis – Napoli. This is not a fable in the sense of something untrue or fantastic. Instead it is a way to state a truth that cannot be stated otherwise. It reflects Vico's claim in the *Scienza nuova* that fables were the first form of human thought and that they embodied the first truths – a fable is always *vera narratio*.

(2) Biography is a form of history that treats of the particular. If Vico can present his own life as a cycle of providential events, he has a verification of his history or science of humanity. The *Scienza nuova* is the autobiography of the human race, told as an objective account. It is autobiographical because its truth is made, because the very agents who have made the human world can make a knowledge of it by Vico's famous metaphysical principle of *verum ipsum factum*. Vico has made the events of his life and thus he can make a knowledge of them.

(3) Any autobiography requires a master image that implicitly or explicitly governs the persona the author wishes to convey. Vico is the modern Socrates, misunderstood and persecuted but not put to death. This Socrates is not the Platonic Socrates of textbooks, who is an opponent of rhetoric. It

is more the Latin Socrates of Cicero, who is a master of speeches and who brought philosophy down from the heavens and into the cities and homes of men. Vico, as he presents himself at the very end of his autobiography, in describing his teaching, wishes to embody the Renaissance humanist ideal of *la sapienza che parla*, of the wisdom that can speak. Thus Vico's science is based on rhetoric in the sense that the principles of rhetoric must guide the presentation of a legal case in order to secure the truth.

In reading any of Vico's works two things must be kept in mind that are not always kept in mind by his commentators and interpreters: that he was a professor of Latin eloquence or rhetoric, and that rhetoric in Vico's day was the key to jurisprudence. As he declared in the *Scienza nuova prima*, his science was a jurisprudence of the human race.