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978-0-521-19062-6 - Vico and the Transformation of Rhetoric in Early Modern Europe

David L. Marshall

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**Introduction**

Few thinkers of comparable stature have resisted integration into European intellectual history to the same degree as Giambattista Vico. Vico—professor of rhetoric in eighteenth-century Naples—is customarily regarded as the most original thinker in the Italian philosophical tradition. Yet there is no consensus on where to categorize him. No one is satisfied with the conclusion that Vico was intellectually isolated and should simply be considered *sui generis*. But, by the same token, a good deal of excellent scholarship has failed to uncover a set of rich and robust interchanges between Vico and his contemporaries that could anchor him in a particular sequence of intellectual inquiry. Traditionally, scholars have characterized Vico as another father of history, a modern Herodotus anticipating the historicists of the nineteenth century who imagined that history as a whole had some kind of cognizable form. In this reading, Vico prefigures thinkers in the German historicist tradition—Herder, Hegel, Marx—and depending on who is doing the narrating, this is thought to be either heroic or tragic. Either way, Vico is taken to be a thinker who licenses the ideologically motivated interventions in history that distinguish the modern age. But in recent decades, scholars have shown that in order to reduce Vico to a philosopher of history, one has to ignore a whole host of intellectual interests that are basic to Vico's oeuvre and to his masterpiece, the *Principi di scienza nuova d'intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni*.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thus, Croce famously described Vico as *il secolo decimonono in germe*, "the nineteenth century in embryo." Benedetto Croce, *La filosofia di Giambattista Vico* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1997), 229. Edmund Wilson traced Lenin's arrival in St. Petersburg in 1917 back to Vico, among many others, in *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* (New York: Doubleday, 1940).

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To characterize Vico as the first historicist is to read him retrospectively through thinkers who come after him. Yet it is also possible to see him as a terminus rather than a point of origin, for there is also a sense in which he is the last great Italian humanist. As the historian of Italian philosophy, Eugenio Garin, has explained, it is impossible to understand Vico without relating him to the Renaissance. Vico shares with many Renaissance thinkers some of the most basic humanist presuppositions. Vico believes that human beings make themselves measures of the world they inhabit, that they function best when the words they use arise directly from their own experience, that imagination is the most crucial cognitive faculty because it permits human beings to situate themselves between the merely sensory and the merely intellectual, and that the *vita activa* is the most intense mode of humanistic practice. These are the intellectual commitments that link Vico to what has become the canonical expression of Renaissance humanism—namely, civic humanism—and the presuppositions shared by Vico and the humanist chancellors of fifteenth-century Florence have a common source: rhetoric. Vico shared with the likes of Leonardo Bruni a profound immersion in the legacy of Greco-Roman rhetoric. Both saw the world through texts by Aristotle, Demosthenes, Cicero, Quintilian, and others that deal with the theory and practice of public speech.<sup>2</sup>

For a long time, Vico has oscillated indeterminately between his roots in Italian humanism and his afterlife in German historicism. That a thinker should be thought of as an intermediary between the Italian and German intellectual traditions is not strange. One of the major issues in European intellectual history is precisely the originality with which modern German thinkers received and reformulated early modern Italian ideas. But that a progenitor of historicism should have been at the same time a descendent of rhetoric is paradoxical, because each of these traditions has a fundamentally different attitude toward the centrality of what I shall term the analytical categories of the here and now. Everything in rhetoric is oriented toward the *hic et nunc* of oratorical performance and its reception. By contrast, historicism continually subordinates that which is temporally and spatially most immediate for the purpose of identifying master narratives that exceed the bounds of particular times and places. This book contends that Vico maintains basic affiliations to

<sup>2</sup> In *Dal Rinascimento all'illuminismo: Studi e ricerche* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1970), Eugenio Garin's opening narrative stretches from Campanella to Vico, whereas in Karl-Otto Apel's *Die Idee der Sprache in der Tradition des Humanismus: Von Dante bis Vico* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1963), the arc extends from Dante to Vico.

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both these traditions, and it explains that in this case what appears to be a paradox is in fact an irony. Vico manages to embrace the contradiction between humanism and historicism by transferring rhetorical categories of analysis that are oriented to the here and now to societies where those categories are habitually subordinated. It certainly is ironic that categories of analysis born in the intensive immediacy of the Greek polis and the Roman republic could become even more intellectually decisive in the worlds of modernity where disciplines such as economics and sociology thrive precisely because they play down the significance of individual phenomena. But not every irony is a mere self-contradiction, and the work of this book will be to show that Vico specified a multitude of ways in which rhetorical analysis could remain decisive even in ostensibly nonrhetorical circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

## I. The Thesis of Sublimation

If one reads the work of Giambattista Vico from beginning to end, a problem appears: Where has rhetoric gone? To be sure, Vico begins with rhetoric. His early work engages the classical rhetorical tradition directly in the canonical texts of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. Vico's monograph on the 1701 coup d'état at Naples, the *De coniuratione principum neapolitanorum*, ventriloquizes speech between mass and elite. In his first significant publication, the *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* of 1709, he denounces the study methods of Cartesian inquiry (a totem for philosophical modernism and its critics) and revises the topical, rhetorical approach of the ancients. And for decades, as professor of rhetoric from 1699, he introduces students to the art of persuasion itself. But after 1710 this manifest concern for rhetoric disappears from his published work. The *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia* of that year is a metaphysics. Vico surveys the lexicon of Roman Italy for signs of an esoteric wisdom, a philosophy embedded in the Latin language itself. He advances the humanist claim that human beings genuinely understand only those artifacts that they themselves have brought into being—mathematics, with its postulates, is paradigmatic. He combines that claim with the notion that human beings are merely witnesses to the world of nature but they are causes in the world of men. A decade later, with the publication of his historical investigation into Roman law, the *Diritto universale*, Vico

<sup>3</sup>The liminal quality of Vico's rhetorical interests is aptly signaled in Giuliano Crifò, "L'ultimo retore, il primo scienziato?," in *Institutiones oratoriae: Testo critico, versione e commento di Giuliano Crifò* (Naples: Istituto Suor Orsola Benincasa, 1989).

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announces a major new research program. Turning to political philosophy, he takes on the response of seventeenth-century natural law theorists to the rise of skepticism. Grotius, he argues, was right to look for a *ius gentium*, a law of peoples to anchor justice where jurisdiction was contested or absent. But, for the Neapolitan, the search for the *ius gentium* must historicize. The archive is Roman law. By the time of the *Scienza nuova*, where he explores the conditions of possibility for human society, a new paradigm of historical inquiry is dominant. Vico places Homeric poetry alongside Roman law, perceiving an analogy: Just as Roman law had no single source (no Solon, no Lycurgus), so Homer was no individual author. In Vico's opinion, what has come down to us in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is the distilled essence of popular storytelling, oral performance (and, in broad terms, this is what classicists now believe). The word *rettorica* does not appear once in the 1725 edition of the *Scienza nuova*. In the final 1744 edition, the term surfaces three times, but it is never pivotal in an argument.

Is this apparent disappearance of rhetoric in Vico a story worth telling? One might say that Vico was simply a rhetorician by profession, that in fact he coveted a position in a different discipline (law), and that the occlusion of rhetoric indicates nothing more than a progressive decline in the relevance of rhetoric to his chief research interests. Or, one might say that rhetoric—once the capstone of a Greco-Roman education—was a declining force in European intellectual culture and that Vico, attuned to the rise of other problems, is symptomatic of a more general disenchantment with the art of persuasion, indicative therefore of a belief that the *ars rhetorica* could be nothing more than an old-fashioned accoutrement to a genteel education. Neither of these narratives would warrant sustained exposition. In reality, however, the progressive withdrawal of rhetoric from the surface of Vichian inquiry testifies to an intellectual process of embedding in which rhetoric came to occupy an absolutely constitutive and yet invisible place in the foundations of Vico's thinking. I term this process *sublimation*. The principal contention of this book is that if one wants to construct an overarching account of what Vico achieved as a thinker, then the single best line of inquiry to follow is his sublimation of rhetoric. By *sublimation* I mean three things.

First, sublimation in its original alchemical signification is change from solid to gas (and vice versa) without passing through an intermediary liquid phase. Just so, Vico shattered rhetoric as the art of persuasion—atomized it into its constituent concepts—and then proceeded to reconstitute it in an almost unrecognizable form. Because the intermediary

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stages of this reconfiguration are very difficult to perceive, the process has escaped scholarly attention. On the surface, few markers indicate Vico's movement from the art of persuasion to his "new scientific" inquiry. For this reason, scholars have overlooked the most basic—and most telling—trajectory in his thought. Specific parts of the rhetorical enterprise remain active in the *Scienza nuova*—topoi become axioms, *elocutio* becomes a poetic logic, *pronuntiatio* reappears as Homer, the temporal orientations of forensic, epideictic, and deliberative rhetoric evolve into a very particular analysis of historical consciousness. Yet if these aspects of Vico's mature thought are not properly situated in a narrative of sublimation, the simultaneously classicizing and modernist trajectories of Vico's intellectual achievement do not come into alignment and the rhetorical terms that remain in the *Scienza nuova* seem to be nothing more than so much flotsam and jetsam. Without a precise attunement to their rhetorical provenance, it is impossible to grasp Vico's core concepts in their entirety. Once liberated from the discipline of rhetoric, however, those concepts take on decisively novel roles and solidify new paradigms for research in the humanities.

Second, sublimation is a rendering sublime that is psychodynamic in nature. As in Longinus, this second sense of sublimation denotes elevation to what classical rhetoric identified as "the high style" (as distinct from the low and the middle styles, deemed appropriate for speaking on occasions that are not highly formal or extraordinary). The *Scienza nuova* concentrates on episodes from Greek and Roman history that required language fashioned in the high style. The work traces the afterlife of oratorical performances originally occasioned in periods of crisis or radical indeterminacy. It follows those acts from their birth in circumstances of overt confrontation to their undead existence in culture in the form of assumptions and habitual intuitions. This sense of sublimation clarifies the stakes of Vico's ultimate obsession with "the autochthonous," which becomes a metaphor denoting complete embeddedness. For him, what springs up directly from the earth untouched by anything foreign is a site for exploring what lies beyond the attentions of self-consciousness. Vico eliminates reflection as much as possible and focuses instead on communities that are out of control, communities that exist in a constant state of cultural improvisation.

Yet in a loosely Freudian sense, this "rendering sublime" also forces affect down into the substructure of memory. Vico reconceptualizes the mechanisms of cultural memory. Compare his narration of Neapolitan crisis in the *De coniuratione* with his diagnosis of Greek and Roman crisis

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in the *Scienza nuova*. One does hear the echo of Masaniello—the plebeian hero of Neapolitan republicanism in 1647 who became a cult hero in the city’s collective memory—in Vico’s version of the 1701 Conspiracy of Macchia. Thus, we can say that even before his reinvention of rhetoric the topos “Masaniello” interests Vico. But, armed in 1744 with his revisionist understanding of Homeric poetry, Vico is able to offer a much more potent account of such topoi insofar as they sublimate moments of crisis into figures of enduring cultural significance. In the *Scienza nuova*, the pagan gods transubstantiate civil strife. Episodes that arose in civil war are set down in the form of fables: Minerva is born when Vulcan strikes Jove. That is to say (in Vico’s decoding), the city-state, the *città* is born when plebeians challenge patriarchs.<sup>4</sup> In this way, the *Scienza nuova* sublimes rhetoric by showing how crisis becomes custom in the course of being remembered time and time again.

Third, sublimation—an atomization that both raises up and forces down—is also an overcoming. Vico overcomes a basic contradiction confronting rhetoricians in the eighteenth century. On the one hand, classical rhetoric had been a discipline specialized in the adroit calibration of oral performance in institutions where orator and auditor appeared in the same space and time. On the other hand, the minds of early modernity faced a world of nascent nation-states and transoceanic trade that was pushing at the limits of politics conducted on a human scale. Vico’s Naples was merely a provincial node in shifting European empires—Spanish, Austrian, then Spanish again. Empire eclipsed the city-state, which had been the muse of civic humanist values both in antiquity and in the Renaissance, and Vico thinks of himself as, in part, a historian of this very transition from city-state to empire. When Vico argues in the *Scienza nuova* that there was no *civil* royal law by which the Roman people acclaimed Octavian as Augustus, when he posits instead that there is a *natural* royal law according to which all republics must become monarchies or perish, he is living in a world of Machiavellian anxiety about the possibility of a republic that extends far beyond the walls of the city-state.<sup>5</sup> The Roman example, Vico intuitively illustrates a basic political fact—government struggles to localize itself, struggles to manifest itself in the here and now on a scale that is commensurate with individual

<sup>4</sup> Giambattista Vico, *Principi di scienza nuova d’intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni*, in *Opere*, ed. Andrea Battistini (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1990), §589 (henceforth, “1744 *Scienza nuova*”).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, §29.

human beings. In Vico's eyes, empire is a more likely than not outcome of the instability of republican modes of governance.

Sublimation, then, is the best way to describe the threefold process by which rhetoric faded from view in Vichian inquiry and yet remained crucial. Vico's *Scienza nuova* is a sublimation because it requires an overcoming of classical rhetoric's most absolute presupposition—the presupposition that analysis of confrontations taking place within the parameters of the here and now is the necessary and sufficient business of political analysis. This conceptual sublimation, this overcoming, succeeded in reinventing rhetorical inquiry as an invaluable civilian capacity for societies radically different from those that had produced the art of persuasion in the first place. Vico is a key figure because he demonstrates that, even if it developed in the city-states of the ancient and early modern worlds, civic and humanist analysis does not remain entirely dependent on those rather unusual forms of social and political organization. To be as explicit as possible, my chief claim is that Vico's oeuvre takes on a new unity and sense of purpose when it is understood as a sequence of responses to the following question: How can rhetorical inquiry give an account of politics useful for a society that does not possess institutions capable of guaranteeing public debate? My claim is that Vico overcomes classical rhetoric's inappropriateness for modernity by jettisoning the assumption that orator and auditor are immediately present one to another in place and time. To be sure, Vico never describes his agenda in these terms. It will require considerable reconstruction of the logic and evolution of Vico's thought to show that his works constitute a series of answers to this question.

Turning the attention of rhetoric away from direct confrontation was a radical move. It entailed among other things an absolute evisceration of the fifth canon of rhetoric, the canon of delivery that advised orators on everything pertaining to live performance. Live performance had been at the heart of what made rhetorical inquiry distinctive, and none of the tactics that Vico redacted from the art of persuasion into his new science would have existed had it not been for the relentless orientation to the here and now that the participatory institutions of the ancient world had demanded. The absence in Vico's Naples of any truly meaningful political venue for oratory forced him to rewrite the *ars rhetorica* in a new mode. But what was for Naples a political debility was for Vico an intellectual boon. It liberated him from the duty of telling people what to do when they stood up to speak, and permitted him instead to concentrate on a relatively small number of concepts that really distinguish rhetoric.

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Having won such a separation from immediate practice, Vico was able to reinvent those concepts as a series of tools for uncovering the workings of the human world.

Vico's legacy has so often been understood primarily in terms of his impact on historical theory for the same reason that his work is clearest when understood as a sublimation of rhetoric. Both historical theory and sublimated rhetoric concentrate on how the dead live on in culture even in their absence. Sublimated rhetorical inquiry is chiefly concerned with how it is that human society can be at its heart public, even under circumstances of radical fragmentation where no quorum of constituents ever comes together to meet in one place and time for the purpose of debating and deciding. Under these conditions the very definition of *public* must be altered in a subtle but decisive way. Instead of immediate reciprocity between multiple parties who are free to state their opinions, have them critiqued, and respond to such criticisms, the new mode of publicity that enables radically fragmented societies to overcome isolation (although not necessarily solitude of spirit) is predicated on the notion that a public act is an act that becomes the condition of possibility for a future act. There is no presumption that the future act will be undertaken with an understanding of the historical circumstances out of which the original act emerged into public circulation. Certainly, there is no presumption that the person doing the "glossing" has any memory whatsoever of the person (or persons) who authored that original act. Only the objectivity of the word or deed counts, only its existence beyond the individual in a world inhabited by others. On this definition of publicity, a whole array of new media take the place formerly occupied by the city-state, the polis as the hub of rhetorical inquiry.

The rhetorical institutions of antiquity remain some of the most beguiling images in the history of political thought, situated as they are between concept, promise, and threat. Vico, I argue, is to be understood against the background of this image. He is neither a proponent nor a critic of rhetorical institutions as a paradigm for self-government. Vico is a paradox: the rhetorician who has quite simply transposed himself beyond rhetorical institutions and their presumptions of interaction in the here and now. In order to reconstruct this tension between the immediate publicity of rhetorical institutions and Vico's mediated publicity, this book contrasts the definition of the polis put forward by Hannah Arendt with the definition of an institution advanced by Max Harold Fisch, the mercurial scholar of Roman law, Vico, and C. S. Peirce. For Arendt, the polis "is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the



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space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly." For Fisch, an institution is "any provision or arrangement of means or conditions for subsequent activity, additional to or in modification of the means or conditions that are already present prior to the institution, whether present in nature prior to all institutions or present in nature only as modified by previous institutions." The pivotal difference here is that whereas Arendt the Hellenist stipulates multiple parties must be immediately present for an interaction to count as a space of appearance in the widest sense, Fisch the Romanist allows for the interposition of a host of media between an originator and a perpetuator. Instead of being a polis in the sense of a localized place and time in which I appear to you as you appear to me, the realm on which Vico focuses his attentions is an *institution*, where that term denotes any initiative that becomes the condition of possibility for some subsequent initiative.<sup>6</sup>

The centrality of the Greek—and particularly Athenian—polis for the generation of rhetorical consciousness in Greece and Rome is undeniable. It is certainly not coincidental that Aristotle not only makes the polis central to his account of what it is to be human but also defines the polis in rhetorical terms. As he describes it, a city-state must be large enough to be economically self-sufficient, but it must be small enough that the orator's voice can reach and the orator's gaze can encompass the entirety of the body politic.<sup>7</sup> The Pnyx brought together the 6,000 Athenian citizens who constituted the *ekklesia*, and it made *isēgoria*—the right of all Athenian citizens to speak on matters of public interest—possible. As classicists such as Josiah Ober have argued in recent years the rhetorical awareness that was forged in that assembly and its democratic analogues must be put at the center of Athenian political theory. After all, the Athenian critics of democracy, who have done so much to

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 198–9; Max Harold Fisch, "The Critic of Institutions," in *The Owl of Minerva: Philosophers on Philosophy*, ed. Charles J. Bontempo and S. Jack Odell (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 138. Arendt is, of course, more than simply a Hellenist, but her account of politics is disproportionately influenced by the Athenian experience; Fisch wrote his doctoral dissertation at Cornell on "The Influence of Stoicism on Roman Law." In fact, as Arendt scholars are beginning to appreciate, the Arendtian space of appearance is not nearly so unmediated as her definition of the polis implies, so that the juxtaposition proposed here actually reveals a spectrum running between "poleis" and "institutions" that draws Arendt and Fisch into dialogue. See David L. Marshall, "The Polis and its Analogues in the Thought of Hannah Arendt," *Modern Intellectual History* (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a and 1326b.

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determine the structure of European political debate, were responding to these oratorical practices and their rhetorical articulation.<sup>8</sup>

Romanists too have emphasized the centrality of the spaces of immediate encounter that lay at the heart of both the city and the constitution of republican Rome. Indeed, Fergus Millar goes so far as to describe the Rome of the fourth century BCE as a polis. Quite whether—or how—Rome ought to be classified as a democracy remains undecided, but it is true that by the first century BCE the basic anomaly of the Republican political order was that Roman citizens throughout the Italian peninsula, even freed slaves, had the right to vote and yet they could only exercise that vote in the city of Rome itself. The Roman polity had to collapse in on itself, so that the *populus Romanum* could manifest itself in the *comitia tributa*. The nation-state, as Millar terms it, could only express itself through the institutional relics of the city-state. If this space was transformed in the course of the first century into the eye of a storm that destroyed the Republic, this means simply that any account of Roman history in that period must deal directly with the very particular—and very particularly rhetorical—parameters of the here and the now set out by the Forum.<sup>9</sup>

Vico's transformation of rhetoric needs to be understood in the context of his rejection of the immediate interactions that were so crucial for the Athenian and Roman political experiences. In this way, Vico is also to be understood as someone who rejects the notions of participation that were essential to Renaissance reinventions of republican political theory. The reemergence in the late medieval period of city-states as potent and

<sup>8</sup> To flesh out this tension between rhetorical articulation of democratic realities and philosophical criticism of democracy, compare two books by Josiah Ober—*Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) and *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). For a more complex, comparative introduction to the Greek poleis, see Mogens Herman Hansen, *Polis: An Introduction to the Ancient Greek City-State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Fergus Millar, *The Roman Republic in Political Thought* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 2 and *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998). Millar's argument that Rome ought to be thought of as a kind of direct democracy has not persuaded everyone. But, even among those who are cautious about that claim, there is a heightened awareness of the crucial role of spaces like the Forum in Roman political life. Thus, in *Mass Oratory and Political Power in the Late Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Robert Morstein-Marx puts the Forum front and center in his account of the *contio*, and historians of rhetoric too are demonstrating an increased attention to the spatial configurations of Roman oratory. See William J. Dominik and Jon Hall, eds., *A Companion to Roman Rhetoric* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).