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Introduction

On 25 October 1725, the Neapolitan scholar Giambattista Vico wrote a letter to his Capuchin friend Father Bernardo Maria Giacco, in which he reflected on the dismal reception of his book the *New Science* in his hometown: 'In this city I account it [the *New Science*] as fallen on barren ground. I avoid all public places, so as not to meet the persons to whom I have sent it; and if I cannot avoid them, I greet them without stopping; for when I pause they give me not the faintest sign that they have received it, and thus they confirm my belief that it has gone forth into a desert.' And yet, Vico continues, this calamity did not dishearten him: 'For by this work I feel myself clothed upon with a new man; I no longer wince at the things that once goaded me to bewail my hard lot and to denounce the corruption of letters that has caused that lot; for this corruption and this lot have strengthened me and enabled me to perfect this work. Moreover … this work has filled me with a certain heroic spirit, so that I am no longer troubled by any fear of death, nor have I the mind to speak of rivals.' Against the latter, who either ignored or poured scorn on his work, Vico puts his faith in God who 'renders justice to works of the mind by the esteem of the wise, who are always and everywhere few', but are bound to be 'men of the loftiest intellect, of learning all their own, generous and great-hearted, whose only labor is to enrich with deathless works the commonwealth of letters' (A, 14–15).

Vico's judgement on the fate of his work proved accurate, in both its realistic and it prophetic segments. Although the *New Science* was actually well received in some instances and places in the years after it appeared, such cases were for the most part only sporadic oases in the larger 'desert' of negligence. There it sank and remained buried for a whole century until, as Vico predicted, some 'men of the loftiest intellect, of learning all their own, generous and great-hearted' rescued it for 'the commonwealth of letters'. My study is concerned with four such men: the French historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874); the Irish writer James Joyce (1882–1941);

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the German literary scholar Erich Auerbach (1892–1957); and the English philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997). There were, of course, others who were likewise instrumental – perhaps even more so – in resurrecting Vico's name and works, among them, most notably, the great Italian scholars Benedetto Croce and Fausto Nicolini who published the first critical edition of Vico's writings in the early decades of the twentieth century; but, as the title of this study indicates, my main aim is to trace the legacy of Vico in modern cultural history, and in that particular history the four authors mentioned above have been most prominent. What exactly is this 'legacy', and why, of all the various theories and histories to which Vico has contributed, this preferment for 'modern cultural history'? These are questions which will be clarified in the course of this book, although a tentative and very brief answer will be given in these introductory pages. In any case, recalling that in his *Autobiography* Vico proposed to have the 'four authors' whom he regarded as the most important for his studies – Plato, Tacitus, Bacon, and Grotius – 'ever before him in meditation and writing' (A, 138, 154–5), I propose to do the same with my 'four authors' in this study, as I seek to answer these questions through meditation and elaboration on their works.

And there is no better way to describe my 'four authors' as readers and admirers of Vico than in the terms in which Vico regarded his: they all regarded Vico as the 'author' who was most important for their own intellectual development and creative achievements. 'I had no master other than Vico. The principle of living force, of humanity which creates itself, made both my book and my teaching' (PHF, 152) – thus wrote Michelet near the end of his life, and the others expressed the same sentiments, albeit in less flamboyant fashion. Thus, James Joyce, in a moment of serious crisis in his life, fearing he was going blind forever, wrote to his patron: 'I should like to hear Vico read to me again in the hope that some day I may be able to write again.'[1] And the great philologist Erich Auerbach, summing up his professional life, wrote in the introduction to his last book: 'Early in my studies I became acquainted with Vico's conception of philology and of the "world of nations"; in a very specific way this conception has complemented and molded, in my thinking and in my work, the ideas deriving from German historism', thereby enabling him to forge a humanistic 'conception of philology' to which he remained faithful throughout his life (LL, 7). As for Isaiah Berlin, who

[1] Letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, 25 March 1925, in *The Letters of James Joyce*, ed. S. Gilbert and R. Ellmann (New York: Viking, 1966), III, 117–18.

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famously classified all authors as either 'foxes' who know many things or 'hedgehogs' who know one great thing, he himself was certainly a fox inasmuch as he seems to have written about just about everything; yet when he came to write his intellectual testament he made it clear that the discovery of Vico's theory of history, while he was still a student of analytic philosophy at Oxford, was the occasion that 'first shook' him out of the positivistic delusion – or, as he preferred to call it, 'monism' – that there ought to be absolute solutions to all philosophical questions. Vico's assertion that we can truly know only what we, or other people, have made or done, exposed that monistic fallacy, because it implied that inasmuch as human reality is made up of so many different aspirations, arising out of so many different conditions and questions, there are no, nor could there ever be, absolute solutions to them all. For the young Berlin, Vico appeared to have undermined the grand project of the Enlightenment: 'My political pluralism is a product of reading Vico,' he claimed, mentioning thereafter Herder, the Romanticists, and other proponents of the Counter-Enlightenment.[2] Clearly, then, although the four authors were very different from one another in their personal and professional life stories, as well as in their philosophical and historical theories, they were somehow akin in that they had come to appreciate Vico as their own most important 'author'.

From what I have written so far, it should be clear that this is a study not of Vico but of his legacy. It does not deal with what Vico himself actually wrote or meant to say in the *New Science* or in his other works, but rather with the ways he has been interpreted – and, moreover, by just four of his readers. These, however, were all very authoritative readers, who did not merely read their author but also wrote about him in a way that reflected their own political, philosophical, or other theoretical orientations, which very often were quite different from those of Vico. Both Michelet and Auerbach also translated Vico's *New Science* into their own native languages, French and German respectively, and thereby made his text more accessible and intelligible to contemporary readers (although, in the case of Michelet, the translation was much less reliable as an accurate representation of Vico's own views). To be sure, all three authors who came after Michelet read his translation, just as Auerbach read Joyce, and Berlin read all the others, but, on the whole, they were all independent thinkers and original readers of Vico who were not much influenced by

[2] Isaiah Berlin, 'My Intellectual Path' [1998], repr. in *The Power of Ideas*, ed. H. Hardy (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), 7–8, 13.

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their predecessors. Inasmuch as they all discovered Vico in different times and ways, their perceptions and interpretations of his theories were, for better or for worse, entirely their own.

Following on these assumptions, the four lengthy chapters which make up the book tell the individual stories of these authors, with due attention to the specific biographical and the larger historical backgrounds in which they encountered Vico, so as to make clear how that discovery inspired them to further discoveries and theories of their own. For as their own statements make clear, reading Vico was a major intellectual experience, one that radically affected their world view and vocation. My main contention will be that the discovery of Vico, whether by accident or through more immanent preparation, enabled each one of these authors to develop a singular theory – or, in the case of Joyce, a new kind of story – by which they sought to account for some new aspect of modern life and history, be it, in the case of Michelet, 'nationalism', or, for Joyce, Auerbach, and Berlin, respectively, 'modernism', 'historism', and 'pluralism'. Vico, of course, never used these neologisms, and, as an 'anti-modernist', would probably not have accepted them.[3] But as the titles of the chapters make clear, regardless of what Vico thought, the four authors all believed they had found the 'origins' of their modern theories in his *New Science*.

And so, having garnered from Vico's *New Science* the intellectual inspiration for their own creations, these four authors went on to invigorate entire fields of knowledge and modern modes of exploration, interpretation, and representation in the humanities and in the social sciences as well as in the arts. This fact alone should have made the lonely Neapolitan one of the most famous thinkers in modern intellectual history; alas, as Vico intimated in the letter quoted above, his name and work indeed remained largely obscure, known only to 'the wise, who are always and everywhere few'. And how could it be otherwise? Vico's *New Science* is notoriously difficult, even (some would say especially) for Italian readers, and in spite of all the translations and many useful explications, it remains one of the most inaccessible texts in the canon of modern cultural history. The full title of the book – *Principles of a New Science by Giambattista Vico concerning the Common Nature of the Nations* – evokes in typical fashion both its subject matter and its enigmatic character yet does not really explain what this book is all about. Indeed, this is one of the most puzzling questions concerning the legacy of Vico's *New Science*.

[3] On Vico as opponent of modern science and other fashions see Mark Lilla, *G. B. Vico: The Making of an Anti-Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

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How could a book that is so densely written, bursting with all kinds of philological, philosophical, and historical arguments, all compressed in no apparent order into more than a thousand brief paragraphs; that deals, for the most part, with arcane subjects like the archaic origins of Roman laws and languages, or the invention of all the arts and sciences by means of primitive 'poetry'; that is based on fanciful etymological speculations and on an untenable 'Chronological Table' collating the 'true' biblical history of the Hebrews with the mythical histories of the pagan nations; and, to make matters worse, a book whose author even such respectful admirers of Vico as Thomas Bergin and Max Fisch, in the Preface to their English translation of the *New Science*, admit 'misremembers, misquotes, distorts, or misrepresents the sources to which he refers or on which he is presumably relying'[4] – how could such a book fascinate any readers at all, let alone such astute men of letters as Michelet, Joyce, Auerbach, and Berlin? Or, to rephrase it more positively, what made this book so riveting in spite of all its faults? For one thing is clear: They were all totally captivated by the *New Science*, though they admitted it was not easy to read, let alone like. What exactly did they all find in Vico that so inspired them? Was there, in the *New Science*, a certain common truth or, perhaps more likely in this case, a new myth, of human life and history, around which they could all spin their own different theories?

There are no simple answers to such queries, if only because each one of the four authors discovered Vico in his own way. Nevertheless, by concentrating on the moment of initial discovery, or, as was often the case, the subsequent movement of eventual rediscoveries, certain similarities do emerge, pertaining to what sociologists of science have called the 'context' and the 'content' of discovery. Whereas the first category refers to the circumstantial aspects of the discovery, such as the biographical, political, and other historical conditions in which it occurred, the second deals with the more substantial aspects of the discovery, those which reveal not just how and when a discovery was made, but what was actually discovered.

With regard to the contexts of discovery or rediscovery of Vico, I will show that in all four cases this occurred at a time of acute political crisis, when wars and revolutions had all but destroyed the moral and cultural foundations of the societies in which the authors lived, and the whole process of Western civilization seemed to be breaking down. In such

[4] *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas G. Bergin and Max H. Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), xviii.

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circumstances the discovery of Vico will be seen to have enabled all four authors to overcome the personal and communal crises in which they were mired. For such were the post-revolutionary but still tumultuous 1820s in Paris, in which Michelet discovered Vico for the first time, and the year 1854 when the old liberal fighter, having been forced into exile by the new Napoleonic emperor, rediscovered Vico and thereby regained his belief in the revolutionary tradition of his nation; or the period between 1912 and 1923 when Joyce was slowly discovering Vico's new science of cyclical history with its notion of recurring poetic and mythic regeneration, while all around him the old Christian European world in which he had grown was collapsing into the madness of World War I, the Communist and Fascist Revolutions, and all kinds of epidemic and economic calamities; or the years 1924 in Berlin and 1938 in Istanbul, when the German-Jewish Auerbach discovered and then rediscovered in Vico a certain 'order' as well as 'principles' of humanity which could prevail against the dangerous relativistic implications of the German (and his own) tradition of historism; or the immediate years after World War II, when Isaiah Berlin, having witnessed the catastrophic consequences of the totalitarian ideologies of Nazism and Communism, set out to expose their intellectual origins in the monistic philosophy of the Enlightenment, and in so doing discovered in Vico its first and foremost opponent.

Regarding the content of these discoveries and rediscoveries, there is one passage in Vico's *New Science*, an oration of rare literary clarity and beauty in an otherwise drab academic discourse, that appears to have made a deep impression on these (as on all other) readers of the book:

> But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations, or civil world, which, since men had made it, men could come to know. (NS, 331)

As will become clear in the individual chapters of the book, all four authors were deeply impressed by this particular oration. Michelet repeatedly cited it, together with Vico's additional conclusion that insofar as 'this world of nations has certainly been made by men, and its guise must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind', it follows that 'history cannot be more certain than when he who

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creates the things also narrates them' (NS, 349). Michelet found in that notion his own Romantic conception of the historical vocation, claiming that the main task of the historian is to retrieve the mythological 'modifications' by which his own nation has been created and ought to be narrated. Joyce, who did not quote any words from Vico's works in any of his writings, nevertheless evokes the nocturnal imagery of history and historical inquiry in both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. For example, in Stephen Dedalus' famous expression that 'history is the nightmare from which I am trying to awake' (U, 2.377), or, much more profusely, in *Finnegans Wake*, which, according to Joyce's own disclosure, is thoroughly immersed in the primordial reality of dreams and suchlike atavistic compulsions and recollections which inhere in our consciousness and rule our lives. Moving on to Auerbach, it is noteworthy that he translated and elaborated Vico's oration in many of his essays, including one in which he analysed the peculiar biographical conditions and the philological deliberations which generated it. Moreover, he drew from that oration the spiritual convictions which helped him to survive the dark times when the 'world of nations' had all but lost its meaning as a common 'civil world'. In much the same vein, Berlin found in Vico's words, above all in the resounding assertion 'that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men' by their own different 'modifications', premonitions of his own philosophical and political convictions on individual liberty and historical inevitability; more than any of the others, Berlin was also much impressed by the methodological conclusion of the oration concerning the essential difference between the natural and the human sciences, a subject to which he devoted some of his most important essays.

Clearly, then, among the many subjects which make – or break – up the *New Science*, this magnificent oration appears indeed like a 'light of truth' that illuminates 'the night of thick darkness' around it. According to Auerbach, that is what Vico himself must have felt while writing it, and that is what many of its readers – certainly Auerbach himself – seem to have felt upon reading it. Hence my very simple but also very concrete answer to the question posed above concerning the 'legacy' of Vico: it consists in these interpretations of Vico's oration, above all of the assertion 'that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind'. The following chapters might thus be read as the four authors' commentaries or theories concerning this singular assertion. Moreover, in that oration the four authors might also have recognized the first – and perhaps the best – conception of 'modern cultural history',

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replete with some of the insightful hermeneutical observations that have made that particular history so innovative and attractive in our times.

For although the general notion of 'cultural history' is as old as historiography itself, and may be traced as far back as to Herodotus, the term itself appeared and acquired its current connotations only in the nineteenth century with the publication of Jacob Burckhardt's *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860), where, for the first time in the history of historiography, an attempt was made to describe historical reality through, and as consisting in, its artistic creations. Burckhardt drew his main inspiration as well as much of his historical information from such 'unhistorical' sources as contemporary chronicles, or musical, theatrical, and other mythological spectacles, and, above all, from the buildings and paintings of the great artists of the age.[5] But the scholar who had laid for him the theoretical and methodological foundations of 'cultural history' was Jules Michelet. That was Michelet's great achievement in the seventh volume of the *History of France* (1855), where, having just rediscovered Vico's theory of historical recourses (*corsi e ricorsi*), he also invented the very conception of 'Renaissance'. Following on these classic examples, the masters of cultural history have largely developed it in that fashion, concentrating on the notion and historical manifestations of cultural renaissances, with some of them, notably Aby Warburg and Johan Huizinga, introducing many innovations of their own. This was still the fashion in modern cultural history till around 1970 or so, when some young historians, inspired by the new semiotic theories in anthropology and by the larger linguistic and hermeneutic turns in the humanities and in the social sciences, forged a much wider and more modern conception of their vocation, one that has since been known as the 'new cultural history'.[6] As one of the pioneers of that new historiography describes it, the new cultural history was primarily an interpretive science that conceived of historical events as texts, and, accordingly, the main aim of its practitioners was to read these texts 'for meaning – the meaning inscribed by contemporaries'.[7]

The affinities between these hermeneutical assumptions and Vico's methodological observations in the above-quoted oration, and throughout

[5] For a more comprehensive discussion of Burckhardt's cultural philosophy and historiography see my *Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 91–132.

[6] On these and other intellectual sources see *The New Cultural History*, ed. L. Hunt (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1989); Raphael Samuel, 'Reading the Signs', *History Workshop Journal*, 32 (1991), 88–109; 33 (1992), 220–51.

[7] Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Viking, 1984), 3.

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the *New Science*, are evident, and have been duly recognized by such great scholars of the hermeneutic tradition as Hans-Georg Gadamer in his classic *Truth and Method* (1960).[8] Alas, few, if any, practitioners of the new cultural history have pursued this connection. This is yet another reason why I have undertaken to explore that particular legacy of Vico in modern cultural history. For Vico claimed to have discovered the 'truth' about the 'civil world' (*mondo civile*) – how men had made it and why, therefore, men could come to know it – on the assumption, which bears all the marks of revelation ('there shines the eternal and never failing light …'), that the 'modifications', or mental configurations, by which men in 'earliest antiquity' had actually made *their* 'world of civil society' are the 'principles', or foundational 'human institutions' (*cose umane*), of *our* world of civil society, and are recognizable as such 'within' our own human modifications, namely in certain primal notions of humanity that have made up and sustain civil society. He thus set out to discern 'in the deplorable obscurity of the beginnings of the nations and in the innumerable variety of their customs' the universal 'human institutions' which have generated, and still sustain, all human societies (NS, 342). That is what he meant by the title of his book – *Principles of a New Science by Giambattista Vico concerning the Common Nature of the Nations* – a title that clearly evokes, and was probably modelled on, Newton's *Principia* (1687). For just as Newton based his science on the discovery of the principal entities (such as mass, cohesion of bodies, or gravitation) of the *physical* force that has formed and governs the regular movements of all objects in natural reality, so too did Vico seek to discover the *principia* of the *ethical* force (he uses the Latin terms *vis veri* or *conatus*) that has formed and governs the actions of all agents in human society.

As a professional philologist of 'earliest antiquity', Vico readily used the tools of his profession for that task, subjecting ancient literary sources such as the Homeric epics, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and all kinds of Roman relics to new etymological and mythological interpretations. In so doing he transformed philology from an ancient art of reading classic texts and sacred scriptures into a new science of understanding human nature and whole cultures. Thus, by immersing himself in the literatures and material cultures of antiquity, and having 'encountered difficulties which have cost us the research of a good twenty years' (NS, 338), he finally made a crucial discovery – that 'in no nation, however savage and

[8] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. G. Barden and J.Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 19–26.

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crude, are any human actions performed with more elaborate ceremonies and more sacred solemnity than the rites of religion, marriage, and burial' (NS, 333). Based on that anthropological observation, which should have endeared him to the new cultural historians, Vico thus established these three 'human institutions' as the 'principles of humanity', by which all men must abide: 'These must be the bounds of human reason,' he writes; 'And let him who would transgress them beware lest he transgress all humanity' (NS, 360).[9]

As already noted, the new cultural historians in the 1970s largely ignored Vico's cultural theories.[10] But other prominent scholars at the time, such as Hayden White and Edward Said, duly saw the connection and made it clear, thereby turning Vico into an iconic figure in modern cultural theory and history.[11] Moreover, inasmuch as these scholars had also written quite widely on Michelet, Joyce, and especially Auerbach, with due attention to their affinities with Vico, they managed to integrate that particular legacy of Vico into modern cultural history in a way that made it widely known and much more influential. It is largely due to such studies that Vico's reputation in the last decades has become so closely associated with cultural studies. Whereas older admirers appraised Vico's achievements in the classic fields of philosophy, Latin philology, or Roman law, his new admirers are anthropologists, linguists, and literary theorists.[12] Professional Vico scholars have likewise taken a cultural turn, which, in this case, meant turning back to the mythical traditions which shaped Vico's world and views.[13] In so doing they followed, as it

[9] For a more comprehensive discussion see my *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico's New Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 40–66.

[10] See, however, Patrick H. Hutton, 'Vico's Significance for the New Cultural History', *New Vico Studies* 3 (1985), 73–84. Scanning the works of such major cultural historians as Huizinga, Febvre, Elias, Mandrou, Foucault, and Ginzburg, Hutton finds many conceptual affinities between Vico's theories and their histories. Alas, he does not show that any of these (or other) new cultural historians had actually read Vico.

[11] Vico figures prominently in both Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), and in Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975). More generally, the Vico renaissance of the early 1970s is evident in the publication of two major collections, containing essays by some of the most notable scholars of the age: *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*, ed. G. Tagliacozzo and H. V. White (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969); and *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*, ed. G. Tagliacozzo and D. P. Verene (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

[12] Among the many cultural studies inspired by Vico, two are outstanding: Michael Herzfeld, *Anthropology through the Looking-Glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[13] See, for example, Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The New Map of the World: The Poetic Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (Princeton University Press, 1999).

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