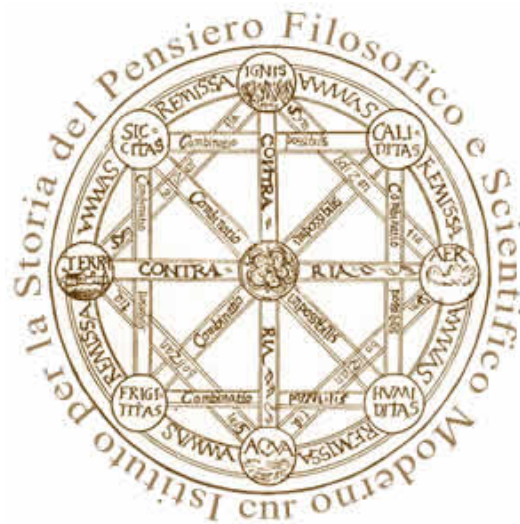


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**The Impersonal in Vico  
'The Classical endures because  
it is impersonal'  
(George Balanchine, «New York  
Times» January 2, 2004)**



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A *topos* of Vichian scholarship is the claim for affinities between Classical rhetoric and Vichian new science. The aphorism of Balanchine, I shall argue, glosses both «Classical» and rhetorical interests in Vico. The tight connection of «impersonal» and «Classical» is of intrinsic interest; Balanchine is concerned above all with bodies; he claims a severe formalism of movements as essence, entirety of dance. Yet a key word is «enduring»; Balanchine is driven by a fear of obsolescence, an anxiety that his choreography will be ridiculed by future audiences. For him the source of ridicule is Romance and Romantic subjectivism, irretrievably dated, time-bound. Thus the more you can reduce dance to an objective, impersonal corporeality, the more you can assure continuity in audience response. The Classical evades the defeats of time by resort to a formalism of motion, Balanchine's austere choreography of steps, rather than to Romantic displays of internal states of mind, Romantic personality. This is a proclamation of a corporeal formalism, pared down, elegant, with nothing redundant, contingent as distraction. What I shall try to argue, counter-intuitively, is Vico's elegant, rigorous, impersonal formalism.

#### 1. *Vico, the Impersonal, Classical rhetoric*

I have noted in previous papers the lack of proper names, the eschewal of narratives of personal decision and action in the *New science*<sup>1</sup>. This is not a minor stylistic choice, but a consequence of one his deepest commitments, a commitment, I will argue, to the «impersonal». Vico begins his «Introduzione dell'opera» with the statement that his interest is in the civil, rather than the moral; indeed, the civil replaces the moral, the emphasis is on the civil as not moral. Impersonal glosses civil, but impersonality functions on so primitive a level of mode and issue in Vichian inquiry that it recalls Collingwood's «absolute presupposition»; in the *Essay on Metaphysics* Collingwood attempts to specify the «metaphysical» property of absolute presuppositions as so fundamental, so controlling of inquiry program that the assumption is rarely - except perhaps by the metaphysician as historian - either articulated or recognised.<sup>2</sup> Vichian impersonality is an orientation to the discovery of common capacities, communal actions, so basic that it needs no articulation. Or, it can be characterised as a Peircian «belief» that generates «habits of

<sup>1</sup> A. PONS, *Una storia senza 'propri nomi'*, in *Il sapere poetico e gli universali fantastici. La presenza di Vico nella riflessione filosofica contemporanea*, ed. by di G. Cacciatore, V. Gessa Kurotschka, E. Nuzzo and M. Sanna, Napoli, 2004, pp. 275-286.

<sup>2</sup> «Absolute presuppositions are never [...] propounded» (R. G. COLLINGWOOD, *Essay on Metaphysics*, Oxford, 1940., p. 32-33).

action in inquiry», such as the habit of selection of topic - of foundational, communal rituals, or the natural progress of shared metaphors, or a nation's «common sense»<sup>3</sup>. Or, impersonality is a critical, contestatory disposition: the habit of the impersonal is anti-personal, rejecting individualist issues and evidence as distraction, merely «private illumination».

Certainly Vico's discovery of poetic origins as master key of his discipline depends, according to Fisch, on an anti-essentialist position: individual men do not possess humanity as essence, rather, we observe men in groups become humane, or civil: the sources can only be developmentally primitive: «robust fantasy», or «bestial liberty»<sup>4</sup>. Thus Vico insists that ordinary civil motives cannot be read as moral rationalisations, as a tissue of personal intentions and decisions. Indeed the peculiar un-didactic tone of the *New science* is rooted in part in his rejection of the Classical moralist offer of wisdom, the personal delivery of personal skills of prudence of the Classical texts of the «solitary philosophers», «filosofi monastici o solitari»<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, the civil requires at every juncture, each alteration of human affairs attention to shared beliefs, «common sense», to basic, that is, embodied, capacities; to actions as concerted, perhaps opaquely so. Balanchine fears obsolescence, the failed expression of the conceit of choreographers—that their Romantic feelings count; Vico feared antiquarian conceit, the scholarly irrelevance of intellectual isolation; both view conceit as personal flaw, solipsism in performance.

What we must confront are Vichian antipathies to his immediate context of Early Modern Classical investigations, and the strenuous nature of his discriminations against particular Classical motives and results. He is, in practice, hostile to the themes and values of much of the antiquarian scholarship of his day. He is unreceptive to the constant individualistic moralising of almost all levels of Classical pedagogy, and thus as well to 'imitation' as appropriate personal use of the Classical. Impersonality is not simply an assumption or value but invests and defines a pervasive practice; it is the 'tone' of the civil discussion, and the absence of that tone would render the *New science*

<sup>3</sup> C. S. PEIRCE, *How to Make Our Ideas Clear*, in *Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Bloomington IA, 1982, vol. 3, p. 263.

<sup>4</sup> «[...] formati de fantasie robustissime, come d'uomini de debilissimo razicinio», «[...] nella loro immane fierezza e sfrenata libertà bestiale» (G. VICO, *Principi di Scienza nuova d'intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni* [1744], in *Opere*, 2 vols. ed. by A. Battistini, Milano, 1990, vol. I; capovv. 34, 338; now *Sn44*). See M. FISCH, T. BERGIN, *Introduction*, in G. VICO, *New Science*, Ithaca-NY, 1968, p. XXXIX.

<sup>5</sup> *Sn44*, capovv. 130.

an entirely different project. Impersonal, then, qualifies and justifies a series of investigative choices. For example, there has been considerable discussion of Vico's rhetorical allegiances. What I now argue is that the impersonal motivates the pervasive, yet diffuse, presence of specific rhetorical capacities and habits of action in inquiry in the *New science*, that is, those habits that define and validate civil interests. It is most pertinent to recall that the originary Classical rhetoric as a mode of inquiry is 'civil' inquiry. Heidegger's 1924 reading of Aristotle's account of this discipline in the *Rhetoric* finds in the early Hellenic development the original discipline of the «original argument», the political discourse of the courts, the assemblies, the oratory of the games. Heidegger claims that this rhetoric is not an autonomous linguistic *techne*, but functions entirely inside politics<sup>6</sup>. Vico, in short, finds, and modifies, or re-invents an archaic rhetorical method for his genetic study, his exploration of the archaic. Of course, the material as well as the mode of Vichian inquiry is Classical: «ancient» Italy; Rome; more particularly, the texts of Homer and of Roman law; more particularly still, the archaic anticipations and medieval *Nachleben* of Roman law and customs.

But this originary Classical rhetoric as «life-science» is perfectly suited to the analysis of the impersonal in its devotion to «life», to biological capacities and acts, as well as to civil *facta*, shared inventions: - Vico's customs, institutions, traditions, «fragments of antiquity»<sup>7</sup>.

First, rhetorical premises specify the impersonal as embodied; rhetorical dispositions bridge the biological and civil. Vico's interests in civil history are genetic, seeking the birth, origin of all civil phenomena, jurisdictions, justice, arms, fame, nobility, etc<sup>8</sup>. Rhetorical interests in producing and analysing civil discourse employ a Classical psychology of generation: an interactive continuum of interactive faculties: sensation, perception, imagination, intellection, memory. The early, influential account was Aristotle's, and R. Sorabji speaks of his «biological» concept of the soul, an account of intimate relations of psychosomatic capacities and actions<sup>9</sup>. Aristotle's

<sup>6</sup> M. HEIDEGGER, *Grundbegriffe der aristotelischen Philosophie; Marburger Vorlesung Sommersemester 1924. Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 18, ed. by M. Michalski, Frankfurt A. m., 2002. Karl Löwith entitled his 1924 lectures notes «Rhetoric II».

<sup>7</sup> *Sn44*, capovv. 525; 354-357: «[...] tradizioni [...] da interi popoli custodite» which give «un pubblico fondamento di vero».

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, capov. 18.

<sup>9</sup> R. SORABJI, *Body and Soul in Aristotle*, in *Aristotle's De anima in Focus*, ed. by M. Durrant, London, 1993, p.164. Reprinted from *Philosophy* 49 (1974), pp. 63-89.

definition of man is as the political animal (*zoon politikon*), whose possession of language (*logos*) engenders political activity; biology founds rhetoric as politics, in P. Aubenque's account of the «fully rhetorised psychology» of Aristotle's *Rhetoric II*<sup>10</sup>. Rhetorical psychology asserts the corporeal as bedrock of civil process; or, succinctly, not counsel - *consiglio* -- but nature served providence in civil origins<sup>11</sup>. In Vichian early stages the impersonal is coterminous with the corporeal: these stages, of course, were encapsulated in later ones.

Further, rhetorical capacities and habits of action in inquiry specify the impersonal in another dimension; rhetorical strategies of argument, topical argument, validate the impersonal; they deal with the commonplaces – the principles of argument and the maxims they develop - as the rubrics of common sense, the shared opinions, Vico's belief systems of unreflective judgements of civil communities. We note his use of *topos* in the sense of principle of argument — the One and the Many — in his «*congettura ragionevole*» that the many place names of diverse «*genti*» articulate one originary meaning, «da questa cosa, una in sostanza, si appellarono, con favella articolata, diversamente»<sup>12</sup>. Vico's experience, of course, is not simply with the forms of rhetorical argument, but with the tactics of legal hermeneutics; rhetorical and legal hermeneutics both assume the constant, pervasive linkages of formulaic rules, shared beliefs, with particular instantiations. When Crifò argues the correspondences between legal and rhetorical hermeneutics, he points to the tactics of legal work where the common, shared, generic meaning of the law dominates the interpretation of the particular case; the individual, particular is always overridden by the supra-personal concern for law<sup>13</sup>. The Romanist A. Watson invokes, I would suggest, the Balanchinian Classical value of endurance, perseverance in Roman law; the goal of the practice is to preserve the continuity of law, and the sense of corporate (does Vico etymologically meld corporeal and corporate?) identity of the polity<sup>14</sup>. Most certainly defining early Roman law as «serious poem» defines a corporeal and corporate origin; the phantastic universals as the nucleus of poetic characters,

<sup>10</sup> P. AUBENQUE, *Logos et pathos. Pour une définition dialectique des passions*, in *Corps et âme. Sur le De anima d'Aristote*, ed. by C. Viano, Paris, 1996, p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> *Sn44*, capov. 532.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, capov. 527.

<sup>13</sup> G. CRIFO, *Droit et rhétorique chez G. Vico*, in *Mélanges offerts à Raymond Van der Elst*, Bruxelles, 1988, pp. 103-104.

<sup>14</sup> A. WATSON, *Law and the Roman Mind*, in *Roman Law and Comparative Law*, Athens GA, 1992.

essence of myth, «costituiscono primamente 'la maniera di pensare' proprie non già degli individui ma di interi populi»<sup>15</sup>. And, of course, for Vico «impersonality» as constraint, as selective of shared opinions and dispositions, is not in the same semantic field as «objectivity» and «abstraction»; these function only in the domain of argumentative operations, representing values of purity of inference and stability of terms. The «impersonal» is active in the domain of life, not logic.

Then, recall Balanchine's Classical formalism, a choreography of simple bodily motions; the Latin Classical rhetorical texts of Vico's professional interests dwell on rhetoric as addressing the *motus animi*, the motions of the soul as embodied, intricated with our life-motions, thus impersonal. Political rhetoric addresses the issues of assertion, alteration, change of beliefs; the stimulation or repression of dispositions, habits of mind. The *motus animi*, or dispositions, «modifications of the mind», constitute the essential material of the science as motions, as genetic development, as «natural progress», as reiterations. But this suggests that the very large scale *corsi* and *ricorsi* of the Vichian civil account as collective actions, biological in mode, are not at all submissive to teleologies, certainly not to the imposition of *telos* by author's narrative. Rhetorical choice is not simply Vico's professional allegiance; a strong concern for topic and issue precedes, underwrites rhetorical choice; the *corsi* and *ricorsi* represent long-range *impersonal* forms.

An Early Modern context for this basic simplicity of Vichian formal motions is the *Dissertatio logica* of Porzio, with its valuable account of medical speculation of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, again, *embodied* theory, the mechanisms performing in the arguments of life science<sup>16</sup>. Here the domain of medical hypothesizing is described as offering novel strategies of argument in the clinical linkage of general protocols and individual cases<sup>17</sup>. Porzio at one point specifies the proper, hegemonous topic of his science as the *Moti di moti*, the structure and process of formal movement itself - in human bodies, in plants, in animals, in floods, earthquakes, air currents<sup>18</sup>. Porzio's austere formalism of motion, addressed often in the medical terms of life-functions has its parallel, I would argue, in the formalism of

<sup>15</sup> J. M. SEVILLA, *Universalismo fantastico, ragione poetica e ragione narrativa*, in *Il sapere poetico e gli universali fantastici*, cit., p. 249.

<sup>16</sup> L. PORZIO, *Dissertatio logica*, in *Opera omnia*, Napoli, 1736, vol. I, pp. 378-381.

<sup>17</sup> A. R. JONSEN, S. TOULMIN, *The Abuse of Casuistry. A History of Moral Reasoning*, Berkeley, 1988; see esp. pp. 36-46 on clinical medicine and its pragmatic constraints.

<sup>18</sup> L. PORZIO, *Lettere e Discorsi Accademici di Lucantonio Porzio a sua eccellenza il signor D. Marzio Pacecco Carafa Colonna*, Napoli, 1711, p. 32.

corporate changes in the Vichian *ricorsi*. There is a similar fascination for that which can be directly related to the most basic, most primitive life functions and events. The earliest, simplest, most «bestial» stages of the Vichian *corsi* are the most necessary explanatory paradigms. The Vichian correlative formalism is an acutely refined, reduced notion of political experience as motion; but there is no attempt to define motion or emotion as subjective, private states of mind, internal scenes; Vichian formality is public, and he recounts public exchanges of motion<sup>19</sup>.

Further, there is as well a Baroque gloss, in Hobbes' invocation of Aristotle: «if we are ignorant of what a motion is, we are of necessity ignorant of what nature is»<sup>20</sup>; perhaps it is this absolutely basic Hobbesian physicalist emphasis on formal motion that motivates Vico's sense of Hobbes civil philosophy as the only precedent for his own *New science*<sup>21</sup>. Then, there is a suggestive qualification of interests in motion in Papini's insistence on the Baroque as defined by the assumption of *conatività*, strenuously impersonal, on motion, bodily initiative as self-sufficient, autochthonous; conativity singles out another aspect of the theoretical purity of formal motion as Vichian context, and glosses Vico's civil narrative, the *corsi*, as elementary life-cycles and their reiteration as reflective of a general vitalist strategy<sup>22</sup>. The consideration of the Baroque context, then, suggests the elegance and selective power of the impersonal as orientation.

## 2. *The Impersonal and the Redesign of Vichian Inquiry*

So far, we have addressed the function of «impersonality» as presupposition in the Vichian investigations, and the harmonies of this presupposition with the Vichian rhetorical premises and procedures in generating practice. The impersonal as absolute presupposition has a contestatory function as well, perturbing basic choices of topic and

<sup>19</sup> P. DUMOUCHEL, *Émotions. Essai sur le corps et le social*, Paris, 1995, p. 87.

<sup>20</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Physics*; 200b 15-16.

<sup>21</sup> FISCH, *Introduction*, p. XXXIII. See *Sn44*, capov. 179: Vico credits Hobbes with being engaged «di considerar l'uomo in tutta la società del gener umano»: the study of man in the whole society of the human race is extraordinary impersonality. Hobbes cites Aristotle in *Leviathan*, in *Collected Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. by Wm. Molesworth, London, 1839; reprinted London, 1994, vol. 3, pp. 51, 40-41.

<sup>22</sup> M. PAPINI, *Vicende seicentesca di Minimi e Conati*, in «Bollettino del Centro di Studi Vichiani» XXII-XXIII (1992-1993). The vital move is to conceive of being as pure conativity, p.169. Papini refers to «impersonal» as value in an anti-individualist ontology, pp. 139-140.

issue. It corrodes the traditional affiliations of the Early Modern recipients of a Classical formation with Classical moral texts as esteemed purveyors of personal moral choices, for example, the texts of the «solitary philosophers», the Stoics and Epicureans,<sup>23</sup>. Very large credit must be given to the Vichian program for its abstention from the tiresome repetitions of thread-bare moralisms which tend to intervene at most junctures in Renaissance and Early Modern political-theoretical texts. And in Vico's narrative of his «twenty years labor» of the discovery of the originary force of poetry as master-key of his science<sup>24</sup>, contests «prosaic» accounts. Vichian impersonality functions as corrosive of authoritative prose, of treatise delivery by the scholar of sustained argument as capable of adequate replication of early developmental modes. Moreover, «impersonal» qualifies Vico's addressees as well as his topic; the *New science* reader is excessively underdetermined by Vico's apostrophes and assumptions. The hostility to the antiquarian mode is hostility even to the «specialist» identity claimed; the reader is given no clues, no assistance in self-definition as specialist<sup>25</sup>.

The *New science* is a web of specific choices, defining and rejecting the inadequacies in argument, the untrustworthiness of treatise accounts of development, a development that requires instead representation as a «natural progress» of metaphor, the figurative historicised. The Vichian project represents a very large effort in redesign of inquiry as a whole, and we must consider the function of impersonality in Vico's reconfiguration of research values, an activity concentrated, in my view, in the redesign of the relation of myth/history. The novelty and strength of this redesign is described by default by Bernard Williams in his intriguing chapter, «What was wrong with Minos?» in his last book, *Truth and Truthfulness*. Williams' project is to give a thick account of the values of truth and truthfulness as issues in, among other things, political philosophy. Williams in this chapter, starting from a query by Herodotus of Minos as possible source of evidence, argues that the vital transition from mythic to historical explanation is defined by Thucydides' contribution; the movement to history also represents a crucial

<sup>23</sup> *Sn44*, capov. 130.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, capovv. 34, 338.

<sup>25</sup> See R. D. CUMMING, *Phenomenology and Deconstruction*, Chicago, 4 vols., 1991. Cumming offers another context for Vichian inquiry; Vico's initiative must be situated in an Early Modern discussion that radically re-theorised the philosophical notion of the 'subject'. If we follow Cumming, the subject as grammatical place-holder for agency is a morass of defining moments: 'rationality', 'consciousness', 'the self', etc.



investigatory progress in Hellenic, that is, Western inquiry<sup>26</sup>. There is nothing surprising in his omission of Vichian notions of myth as history in the Whiggish account of progress from fiction to fact; we, of course, recognise that Vichian mythic inquiry is not a simple assessment or a recapitulation of pre-Thucydidean modes, but is, rather, post-historical. It is distressing, however, to contemplate how much Vichian strategies could have helped Williams in his program of defining a useful history of politics: truth to the rescue of civility, so to speak. Vico's mythic inquiry is an inclusive variant of historical inquiry, certainly not fitting the Whiggish model. Myth-as-history employs myth as evidence; myth vs. history must disdain the use of fiction as fact.

Vichian impersonality, however, modifies this new competence in dealing with myth as evidence; on the most elementary level myth is critical, corrective of the standard historical narrative by means of its details, the small, decisive markers in the mythic fables of types of capacity and action, details that yield perceptions of general, impersonal processes; thus the fable of Atalanta revisits patricians' strategies against the plebs<sup>27</sup>. Vichian myth, then, delivers a thick narrative of impersonality; his historical program is a «Classical» formalism of corporate (both corporeal and community) entities, expressed in notions of corporate motions, changes, transitions. Exemplary of its diagnostic power is the revision of the definition of the «heroic»: the exposition of tactics of violence as anxiety, of strategies of subjugation as expressing verbal scrupulosity problematises the entire heroic corpus as historical source for early Greece.

Vico employs myth to add concrete, credible detail to thin generalisations of moral capacity. Vichian sensitivity to mythic capacity to correct, enrich has its analogue in contemporaneous visual strategies that engage mythic plots. There is a correlation between the rich, diverse program of expositing myth in Vico's history and the amazingly ingenious visual mythographic culture of the late Renaissance and Baroque. The art, in its multitudinous retrievals of the Classical images of gods and heroes, presents us with constant technical negotiations of the representation of the typical and individual, of the impersonal archetype and «personal», telling idiosyncrasy. Myth presents a god or hero as «impersonal» agent, but

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<sup>26</sup> B. WILLIAMS, *Truth and Truthfulness. An Essay in Genealogy*, Princeton, 2002, pp. 149-171. Vico's mythic strategies recall M. FINLEY, *World of Odysseus*, New York, 2002, 1<sup>st</sup> published 1954. Both describe the careful, fraught, unwitting negotiations of heroic societies for public space and action as central in defining Hellenic political origins.

<sup>27</sup> *Sn44*, capov. 653.

dressed, perhaps, in the trappings of eccentric personality; divine revenge played by the all-too-human. The art, and Vico, present the status of the hero as *aporia*.

The boldness of Vichian redesign is illuminated by comparison with another 18<sup>th</sup>-century initiative. If we contrast Vico's use of myth in history with the almost contemporaneous H. Gimma's texts dedicated to relegating, dismissing fable, we may get a sense of the critical strengths of Vico's redesign. These treatments take their place in a corpus of natural philosophical-legal works of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, investigations of the body and the body-politic. Certainly a context for Vico's «*bestioni*» are the giants and monsters of Gimma's *De hominibus fabulosis*<sup>28</sup>. What we find in Gimma is not the elegant and ingenious employment of mythic texts as anthropological evidence, but a rather straightforward, if incoherent, double narrative: on the one hand, the mythic, and here Gimma uses Oldenbourg's words, is described as detrimental to science, as evasive of observation. On the other hand, Christian myths, must be included, and must, of necessity, be true. Gimma's accounts are bookish, lists of ancient and modern curiosities, errors of nature, miscegenations, lists incapable of discriminating fable as trace of early speculations, and interrupted by moments of Christian piety. The effect of reading Gimma's account is of reading self-contradiction; one tries, in vain, to fit Gimma's cautious retention of Christian pieties with his skeptical engagements; his pyrrhonic critique is easily placed in a Whiggish account of pre-modernity; his politic acceptance of the demonic, not<sup>29</sup>.

But Vichian strategies offer a critique of critique; these strategies are impersonal in their stipulations of very large groups in motion, the *gentes*, as revealing the important structures and processes of civilising. By the simple (phenomenological?) strategy of bracketing-off the history of the Hebraic *gens*, Vico saves the vital transitions in the history of the Gentiles, the other nations of the world, from Christian hermeneutics. Where Gimma's Christian piety undercuts his argument, in Vico providence functions as remote

<sup>28</sup> H. GIMMA, *Dissertationum Academicarum, Tomus Primus... I, De hominibus fabulosis*, Napoli, 1714. See esp. «Praefatio Praeliminaris ad Dissertationes Physico-Historicas», on the duty to segregate the false from the true, and liberate us from vain fantasies, p. 7. Also «*De gigantibus post Diluvium*», pp. 42-44.

<sup>29</sup> But see J. ISRAEL, *Radical Enlightenment; Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, Oxford, 2001. His account of Vico's providence is as an initiative of radical secularisation; it seems rather, of pragmatism. And much of the section on Vico, pp. 664-669, applies more to Gimma. But even in Gimma what Israel reads as precursor of modern liberalism seems simple caution, (or pusillanimity): not so much hypocrisy as inadequacy.

guarantee of the perspicacity of a narrative of motion. There are certainly Vichian accommodations to Biblical conventions – the Gentiles are «post-diluvian» strains - but there is not much «pious» about Vico's divine providence. More than this, the Vichian effort can be seen as situating skepticism in an armamorium of techniques: Vico, perhaps, liberates us from liberty, from the untoward effects of *libertas philosophandi*, and thus both from some of the reductionist theories of the rationalist Enlightenment program, and from our own reductive conclusions about the 'modernity' of Early Modernity.

There is another critical effect of Vichian formalism: his impersonal political premises work to de-aestheticise form and rhetorical form. Certainly Vico's rhetorical tactics are closer to the Heideggerean description of Aristotelian rhetoric as political, than to the reduction of rhetoric to eloquence and eloquential concerns of Early Modern, and, indeed, modern, rhetorical theory. Williams, in another chapter of his *Truth and Truthfulness*, attacks H.V. White's rhetoric as too narrowly defined as, merely, eloquence. It is intriguing that Williams, in his discussion of White's claim for rhetoric's control of historical narrative, makes a more interesting case for rhetoric than White. Thus Williams' assertion: «'Rhetoric' is particularly disposed to set free various suspects from the wrong side of the Platonic divide»<sup>30</sup>. In Vico's rhetoric the suspects freed are, I suggest, a range of social scientific topics and thematisations: considerations of contestatory contexts, a taste for radical contingency, for intrusions of 'biological' desires, habits, dispositions. There is a rather delicious symmetry: Williams makes a strong case against White's rhetorical theory of history - writing by singling out White's reduction of rhetoric to poetic in his explanatory paradigm. White defines the historian as poet, master of figure. Vico, on the contrary, uses rhetorical premises and procedures to describe *poesis*, poetic process as generic — not literary – 'making' as a range of inventive interactions in historical development.

But there are also very strong positive effects of the Vichian redesign: «impersonal» allows Vico to distinguish an entirely different strand of political theory and practice. The impersonal is oriented towards a descriptive formalism of raw, powerful agencies, dispositions, habits, motions. It simply negates the formal possibilities of certain scenarios: thus Vico's stigmatisation of solitude as ethically barren. Both the solitude of sense of barbarism and the solitude of the barbarism of reflection constitute non-civil space; it is solitude as personal possession of a pure, simple space, a habitation of a single

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<sup>30</sup> B. WILLIAMS, *Truth and Truthfulness*, cit., p. 242.

agent, and disallows the civil<sup>31</sup>. The barbarism of reflection that performs «*in una somma solitudine d'animi e di voleri*» invents a prison of psychic deprivation, disabling the social, that is, the humane. Vico thus places and relegates the philosophical literature of wisdom and personal prudence to the solitude of will and spirit as a literary consequence of a thin, jejune notion of moral agency. Teaching private prudence loses any relevance to his science.

Yet, impersonality as canon is inclusive, usefully designating a range of kinds of agencies. Here myth is employed by Vico as the archetypal genre of archetypes of impersonal agency in an exaggerated sense. The capacity to extract structure and process from the mythic material is a formalist capacity to detect and describe the «impersonal» motions of society-in-movement. Employing rhetorical techniques of representing *motus animi* in effect rejects articulate justifications and expressed rationalisations in order to focus on the oscillations, contests, failed capacities — on unintended consequences, in short. It delivers archetypes of impersonal agency of intrinsic interest to political analysis, as expansions of the reach of the civil. It validates as well radically different narratives of civil process. Thus the impersonal is essential to, permits irony as theory of cause and effect<sup>32</sup>. For irony as Vichian historical paradigm describes collective actions and collective results rather than recurses to personal intention, will, reason, decision. To be sure, irony in Vico's methodology is the fourth trope<sup>33</sup>; but this is a trope of commentary, reflection rather than the generative mode of unreflective judgements of the *gentes* that constitutes a major factor in his social science; it is a reflection on the unreflective, in short. As a singling out of unintended consequences, it obviously becomes a way of accounting for the development of the civil from the uncivil, perfectly harmonious with his 'biological' notion of development. And Vico's rethinking of the potential of agency sponsors an ingenious use of divine providence as metaphysical justification of irony as mechanism. This ingenuity contrasts vividly with the unresolved contradictions of Gimma's account of Classical (false) and Christian (true) fables.

There is, to be sure, a melancholic tone: formal motions illumine primitive, raw motions, capacities, incapacities, producing irony; and the affirmation of the civil often involves a moral pessimism, underlining an explanatory inadequacy of personal

<sup>31</sup> *Sn44*, capovv. 17, 644, 1099, 1106.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, capovv. 38, 342. R. G. COLLINGWOOD, *The Idea of History*, Oxford, 1946, p. 48, makes the vital theoretical connection between impersonality and irony; Christian providence is the discovery of non-intentionality in history.

<sup>33</sup> *Sn44*, capov. 408.

capacity and action. Yet, probably the most positive effect of impersonality as orientation is the undermining of the cult of personality in political theory and practice. As an account of collectivities, Vichian impersonal inquiry subverts an entire range of overly optimistic definitions of personal political agency, falsifying naïve accounts of an individual's political effectiveness.

Would it be possible to make a claim for Vichian inquiry as usefully criticizing contemporary political inquiry? For Richard Sennett, the «cult of personality» is the fatal flaw of both liberal and anti-liberal models of modern political theory and practice. He speaks of two tyrannies of intimacy, two denials of the reality and worth of the impersonal life: «the extent to which people can learn to pursue aggressively their interests in society is the extent to which they learn to act impersonally»<sup>34</sup>. In modern politics, the cult of personality in state leaders is simply the obverse side of the coin to the recession of public interventions on the part of the populace, where turning off the TV becomes the 'only' political act for a very large proportion of the populace. It is, on their part, a deep regression into the personal as private. Sennett questions as well the Habermasian formulation of the impersonal as 'public': the modern growth of the 'public' domain is a growth of a domain of publicity of expression on the part of a society which is opposed to, critical of, the public power of the state — a flawed sense of civil action.

Certainly, one gets the impression that, while the cult of personality may be of immense benefit to a politician's career it can have only contingent, accidental benefits for policy. The cult fosters accounts of intentions, using personal narratives which are more or less equivalent to the narratives of intentional fallacy in art criticism, of false attributions of agency to animals, or to landscape. In contrast, the inquiry of the *New science* subverts the extraordinary preoccupation of the post-Renaissance Classical formation with personality, and the political analysis that substantiates the cult of personality.

### 3. *The Classical revisited*

We began with Vico's use of civil inquiry to replace moral inquiry as «merely» private illumination. My argument has been that the Vichian «*cose civili*» need the gloss of the impersonal; «impersonal» — a very self-denying property — as a pervasive predilection in the *New science* generates some crucial discoveries of his science. The impersonal as orientation selects very large-scale, very long-range phenomena, and stipulates each element as

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<sup>34</sup> R. SENNETT, *The Fall of Public Man*, New York, 1978, p. 340.

phylogenetic trace of a *gens*, having its place in the centuries-long narrative of *nascimento, corso, ricorso*. The impersonal as inclusive, employs rhetorical inclusive habits of action in inquiry, to give a thick, fine-grained account of this large-scale civil process; these are habits made more obtrusive by the absence of recourse by Vico to Classical texts of philosophical justifications of the political<sup>35</sup>. The Vichian strategies employ Classical rhetorical habits invested by a «rhetorised psychology», with its «biological concept of the soul»; these are habits that devote great portions of the text to physiological and poetic origins, and to *ricorsi*, reiterations of the physiological and poetic. Habits, then, that claim the corporeal as civil interest; all capacities, activities are embodied, composite, diffuse in motive and action. At no point can Vichian inquiry slip into the reductive ease of our «rational decision theory»; his capacities, as biological, of the origin, defy *telos*; processes, *corsi* and *ricorsi*, as developmental are all to be done over again. They are habits, finally, of abstension, acknowledging, in Williams' words, «there is no true teleological history of anything»<sup>36</sup>. Classical endurance, then, is a persistence, an ineluctability of civil problem and the need for formal solution, the absence of final solution.

#### 4. *Excursus*

There is, of course another level of Vichian irony. The key text of explanation of the new science is the *Vita scritta ds se medesimo*, the personal narrative of the discovery and accomplishment of the investigation of the impersonal: a memoir expositing the science of the *genti* as personal accomplishment. It is of intrinsic interest that Vico discriminates between authorial insight into his moral struggles and his civil theoretical accomplishment. It is rhetorically decorous to assign moral resonances to personal strategies of inquiry, where nuance and subtlety necessarily condition insight. At the same time, it is necessary to insist on the civic duty of impersonal civil science. Vico's autobiography manages to describe idealist process as political duty; the memory work and the history work coalesce, and from the experience of his own life process, history is defined as a development of the spirit. Battistini has described Vico's *Vita* as «*personalissima e*

<sup>35</sup> See J. OBER, *The Athenian Revolution. Essays on Ancient Greek democracy and Political Theory*, Princeton, 1996. Ober argues that the Greek philosophical texts of justification and critique of politics deliver a 'remote' account of democracy, one, moreover, that distorts the historical practice of democracy, where the oratorical texts (primarily of the 4<sup>th</sup> century) give an account of the political capacities and actions; not the Athenian truth regime (106), but the *demos* is the authority behind the democratic bodies (119).

<sup>36</sup> B. WILLIAMS, *Truth and Truthfulness*, cit., p. 264.

*inimitabile*», pointing to Vico's sense of discovery as inimitable<sup>37</sup>. «The memoir-inquiry not only attempts to foreclose errors, unusable orthodoxies, but also redefines success as isolation, and this defines the reader/interlocutor, in his isolation, as capable of discovery. The isolation *topos* holds not only for the speaker but also for his audience, the antipathy to authority invalidates the speaker as authority»<sup>38</sup>. In this way, I argue, Vico disallows the cult of personality for the inquirer; yet he insists on investigational equity between author-inquirer and reader-inquirer. «Every man his own historian» is the maxim of a new civil science; our traversal of the territory of discovery is always our own; yet the investigative traversals take their place in a developmental pattern of civil obligation.

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<sup>37</sup> A. BATTISTINI, *Note*, in G. VICO, *Opere*, cit., vol. II, p. 1241.

<sup>38</sup> N. STRUEVER, *Rhetoric; Time, Memory, Memoir*, in *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. by W. Jost and W. Olmsted, Oxford, 2004, p. 438.