# Vico and His Intellectual Milieu

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Giambattista Vico’s Key Ideas on Rhetoric (with Critical Gloses)

Audience

Vico: “Thus the hearer seems ingenious to himself and the acute saying is delightful because it is more known by the hearer than presented by the speaker” (Institutiones Oratoriae, qtd. in Schaeffer, 66)

Hobbs: “Here the listener is an interlocutor, actively seeking and making meaning and delight through his own cognitive acuity . . . Sublime rhetoric weaves together speaker and interlocutors through the orator’s giving the audience the gift of learning something new in a delightful way.” (87)

Axiom / Maxim

Vico: “In order to give form to the materials […] we now propose the following axioms or ‘thoughts worth thinking’ […] which, as the blood flows through animate bodies, so will they within this science and animate it” (The New Science, qtd. in Goetsch, 116)

Goetsch: "Axioms are the 'ties that bind' human things into a history, a pattern of providence and human making that one can address eloquently – that is, comprehensively – as a whole […] Axioms, like the loci of the ancient memory systems, remind us of things we should know in narrating an eloquent whole […] In this way the axioms become pisteis, means of persuasion, by which we come to understand the realities of our situation.” (127)

Cartesian Scientism

Vico: “There is a danger that instruction in advanced philosophical criticism may lead to an abnormal growth of abstract intellectualism [...] Is it not significant that it is precisely the orator whose only concern is the bare truth who gets stranded in cases in which a different speaker succeeds in extricating himself, by paying attention to credibility as well as the facts?” (On the Study Methods of Our Time, qtd. in RT 868-869)

Goetsch: "The skillful orator does not proceed like a 'modern physicist' and lay out the primary axioms first, for this would be to ignore the human realities of the situation […] Since truth must always be remade if it is to be true, the orator does not present a linear, textually oriented account […] to speak to another human being in this way is to demonstrate an appalling ignorance of human reality” (75)

Metaphor & Other Tropes

Vico: “The orator[ . . .] makes beauty which is left to the hearer to discover; for it is present by virtue of the rational connection (ligamen) which, when the hearer discovers it, unites the extremes to allow for the contemplations of the similarity and thus reveals the beauty which the orator brought to pass.” (Institutiones Oratoriae, qtd. in Schaeffer, 66)

Hobbs: “Tropes are treated as forms of thought, and expressions of passion are always in the service of persuading social humans to act as citizens for the sake of a well-functioning society […] Metaphor is a cognitive instrument more than an ornament, productive of new knowledge for the individual and the culture.” (63-71)
**Phronesis & Kairos**

Vico: “It is therefore impossible to assess human affairs by the inflexible standard of abstract right; we must rather gauge them by the pliant Lesbic rule, which does not conform bodies to itself, but adjusts itself to their contours.” (On the Study Methods of Our Time, qtd. in RT 871)

Hobbs: “For civic life, divergent thinking producing a host of probable causes is preferable to linear thought producing the single cause of science. A rhetorical social knowledge, relative to a time or place, constitutes practical wisdom: With his sharpened mind, the citizen can quickly grasp the reality of a situation so that he speaks and acts spontaneously but with dignity and is ready for anything. This model citizen is both a rhetor and scientist, a flexible thinker who uses language and logic in both problem solving and persuasion” (93)

**Print Culture**

Vico: “The invention of printing places at our disposal an enormous number of books” (On the Study Methods of Our Time, qtd. in RT 868)

Hobbs: “The disappearance of a logic specific to rhetoric – enthymeme and example – marks a turn from a socially oriented rhetoric involving the interlocutors to a private text-and-fact-centered rhetoric.” (23)

Schaeffer: “The pedagogy of Peter Ramus […] used the printed book as a tool to combine logic and classical rhetoric to form a 'method' of logical discourse.” (30)

**Sensus Communis**

Vico: “Human choice, by its nature most uncertain, is made certain and determined by the common sense of men with respect to human needs or utilities” (The New Science 63)

Hobbs: “Rhetoric should be both expression and persuasion, tied to practical wisdom drawn from the common sense of a society.” (74)

Hobbs: “Common sense is the accumulated wisdom of societies that comes from a shared way of life and language, helping to narrow the ill-defined world of human choice. It is the standard for practical judgment and for eloquence.” (76)

Schaeffer: “Sensus communis for Vico […] is similar to Aristotle’s phronesis; it is a practical knowledge with ethical dimensions and, most important, its use as an ethical norm presumes that it already exists within the moral attitude of an acting subject.” (102)

**Style**

Vico: The best oratorical style is “intense, sharp, and engaging, leaving its listeners with much to think about” (The Art of Rhetoric, qtd. in Hobbs, 80)

Hobbs: “Vico’s rhetoric offers an alternative to the linear, analytic rhetorics of his day […] Centering on the public nature of discourse and the essentially nonlinear nature of our accumulative, synthetic thought, his sublime rhetoric begins with the body and is poetically based in the process of making metaphors and analogies. Vico’s theory is not one of ornate form nor emotive rhetoric but is a rhetoric of social invention and the logic of status and topics.” (79-80)
Topics

Vico: "Topics discovers and heaps up; criticism sifts the mass and chooses. Thus topical minds are more fertile but less true, while critical minds are truer but more sterile." (De studiorum ratione, qtd. in Mooney, 52)

Mooney: “The mind formed by topics is superior to the Cartesian mind not merely because it is trained to find connections between disparate and apparently unrelated things, but also because it is “copious,” will range widely, consider all possible aspects of a subject under debate, and so guarantee the possibility of truth. Only such a mind is equal to the tortuosities of life and the uncertainties of nature.” (135)

Bibliography


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