

Missing the Fall

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Review-essay of Donald P. Verene, *The New Art of Autobiography: An Essay on the "Life of Giambattista Vico Written by Himself"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991)

The *Autobiography* of Giambattista Vico has generally been regarded as a complement to the *New Science* rather than a valuable work in itself. The destiny of this work was to be used, employed as an auxiliary text by commentators of Vico's major philosophical writings, as D. P. Verene states in *The New Art of Autobiography: An Essay on the "Life of Giambattista Vico Written by Himself."* Coming from within this tradition, Verene essays instead to write a book which would do justice to Vico's "most undervalued work." (vii) Taking the lead from Croce's assertion that the *Autobiography* is the *New Science* in action, Verene pledges to fill in the space opened by Croce who did not pursue his very own instigation. In this pursuit of "justice," the *Autobiography* will stand in its own right as the first of its kind. It will have achieved the exemplary status that the Venetian sponsors wished for it and the whole genre will be forced to redress its modern foundations. The originality of the *Autobiography* rests on what Max Harold Fisch called the "genetic method." (*The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, trans. by M. H. Fisch and T. G. Bergin. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1944). Preceding Fisch's translation (last printing 1990), the original short preface states that "aside from the light it sheds on his other works, and the interest it has in common with every other intellectual autobiography, Vico's has the unique interest of being the first application of the genetic method by an original thinker to his own writings." (v) Verene is thus going to add a new chapter to Vico's work by extending himself beyond Croce while leaning on Fisch's insight.

Indeed, Fisch does not lend any definition for "genetic method," forcing Verene to secure one first in a note and then repeatedly in the text. The definition in the note defying its marginality will overshadow all the others that will follow. It reads:

Fisch does not define "genetic method." I take the term in its broad sense to refer to the fact that Vico's purpose is to understand his life as an intellectual development that moves from step to step and which has an overall coherence. As will be shown, in Vico's case this coherent pattern of development is tied to his conception of "ideal eternal history" and "providence." (note 4, p. 2)

When compared with Rousseau's *Confessions*, the originality of Vico's *Autobiography* rests on an additional expansion of this definition which in Verene's words is now "a systematic narrative applying the genetic method to the causes of his own writings." (60) The quotation marks have disappeared, the writer having made what was Fisch's instigation his own by turning it into a definition. Following this appropriation by an act of inference, "Vico's purpose" is to find a "coherent pattern" linked to his philosophy. And by proceeding "from step to step," Vico will understand the "overall coherence" of his life. A few pages ahead, juxtaposed with Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576) who wrote *De vita propria liber*, Vico is the one who "as the discoverer of the philosophical order of history, applies this historical manner of thought to himself." (70) By now the "genetic method" has turned into an application of the workings ("generative") of history operated by an outsider who, like an archaeologist, brings forth the causes of things step by step, that is, causes that "are internal to their natures" and that "emerge in the development of their natures." (71) Thus "nature" is not strictly "nascimento"—something that happens—but something that "develops" too. And the reason of the analysis weighs more on the causality principle than on divination of the event. Therefore the rhetoric of narration is focused on persuasion rather than on performance.

Verene sets three aims for his procedure: to look for the principles of the *New Science* in the structure of Vico's *Autobiography*; then, following their identification, such principles must be verified; and lastly, one must enter the "theatre of memory" (46-47) that links the inner to the outer world with particular consideration towards the "order" of the unfolding of events. The identification and the verification of principles are here a scientific procedure that implies appropriation and reproduction of a transferable entity. According to this, Vico is the "possessor of an original philosophical understanding of the origin of narrative itself." (47) Thus Vico is the "discoverer" of a new literary art, as new as his "science," since his *autobiography* is the first not only "to apply a genetic method" but the first to link its narrative to a philosophy "based on a new science of narration." (47)

The *Autobiography* and the *New Science* are strictly interconnected regarding the first two points. After the application and the verification of the *New Science*, what is left are the implications, Verene says. But these implications are still linked to the translation of the concept "new." The "new" of the *New Science* is translated into the unspoken yet powerful "new" of the (New) *Autobiography*. This operation is in want of identifying and possibly defining a new genre. A genre which as any genre is still evolutionistic at its heart—as here the terms "generative" and "method" both imply. Furthermore, such a distinction underlies, or better, restates an older one, namely that of separating

the sphere of philosophical writing from that of literary writing. How can one separate this "new science of narration" from the "nuova arte critica" of the *new science*? As the "nuova arte critica" invents the *New Science*, the new "new science of narration" is already at work. There can be no "New Science" outside narration. And indeed for Vico the relevance of myth only testifies to this. Narration is at work from the beginning as a new "ars critica." The novelty of the science is strictly linked to that "ars." In fact, "new science" is already "new ars critica." The two cannot be thought of as a couple. On the contrary, the novelty of the *new science* rests upon praxis; the attention is shifted completely towards the performative whereas it used to lie on metaphysical premises.

It is seductive to think of the *New Science* as of a new *autobiography* of humanity (71) but the operation must carry a judgement and it must be reflexive in structure and ironic in narration, that is, self-narrating. In this we recognize the character of "legere"—the jurisprudence which is at the core of the *New Science*. And law is actually three movements in one: *lex* as *legere* (to link), *se ligando* as reflexive link, and *legenda* as the recounting of the link, i.e., the linking. (Cf. E. Grassi, "L'origine des sciences de l'esprit dans l'Humanisme, Pensée Humaniste et tradition Chrétienne aux XV et XVI siècles [Paris: Publication de la Société d'Etudes Italiennes, 1950]) Such an operation cannot take place without the unmasking of the "conceits" ("borie"). The destruction of the "borie" is the constant task of the *New Science*. (NS, # 1111) The *autobiography* of the human race can, as a myth (*vera narratio*), be narrated again truthfully only once its translation is accounted for. Therefore the allegorical dimension is reinstated to testify to the diversity of the voices (*diversiloquium*) that are true, that are etymological to language.

The implications of which Verene speaks open the discussion towards a hermeneutic which does not challenge the architecture of the whole. On the contrary, he speaks of overall coherence, of discovery of the origins of things upon which to recreate the whole. In this sense there can be knowledge. The "theatrical" is relevant only as a useful means toward awareness; it is not recognized to be the only aspect of human understanding. The "intention" of the author is fundamental to the definition of the felicitous or infelicitous outcome of any interaction—in this case a linguistic interaction. And the space is left open for the intention of the text which is expressed in the possible permutation of its "parts." Of course the role of the reader is rationalized as well in his intention to let the text speak the language of the author.

Representation is at work in every human endeavor from the beginning. In this sense one cannot speak of a reality underlying the representation as a given. Representation is already reality—reality as

translation. The fable is at the heart of humanity. The tropes of the destruction of the "borie" are in themselves metaphors, to which the three basic institutions of God, marriage and burial testify. The geometry of mankind rests upon these three figures which are the "principi," origins and principles, of the metaphorical construction which begins with themselves being metaphors. They represent the poetic or credible impossibility of the "link." A link which is at work first of all within each of them in their singularity. A link that stresses the reflexive while narrating itself. The "generative" aspect of Vico's method should take these workings into consideration.

The question of the method still remains. Verene's statement does not differentiate the method he speaks of from the common understanding of the term, at least since the seventeenth century. With Descartes, and probably due to the elaboration of his followers, method becomes synonym for linearity and its virtue lies in its applications. On the other hand, *metahodos* ("after the way") not only suggests the idea of "following" but also that of "beyond." It is possible to go after the way only if one goes beyond the way. In this sense what is being stressed is not so much the correctness but the seduction of the way which rather than compelling us to stay on it, seduces us to "pursue" it, not to trust it but to take possession of it. Such a "way" wants to be "courted" and not obeyed.

So we cannot go astray from what seduces us—from our illusions. We are not looking any longer for "persuasion," only for action. We want to be there when it happens. The "ratio" is now definitely lost and the "way" leads.

The above aspect of method together with what we have said about "generative" lead to what is "critica." "Critique" and "sooth-saying" parallel "critica" and "divination" in Vico. At the end of "Part B," in the *Autobiography* the concept of "nuova arte critica" is introduced as a powerful force to judge the writers whose conceits must be destroyed. To "judge" is first of all to be understood in its juridical sense and then as "sifting" the true, as divination. Such discretion in reading escapes the English translation (cf. 167) as even the word "arte" is reduced to "method." But there is more. This new critical art "scuopre," unmasks, the way in which men first feigned themselves by feigning their own gods and the whole world. This novelty is tied to the narration seen as performative. The *Autobiography* performs according to such critique.

"Divinare" (cf. NS, # 342) is "indovinare," what is hidden from men ("agli uomini") and what is hidden in men ("degli uomini"). The first reference is to the future, yet Vico uses the word "avvenire." "L'avvenire" is not simply the future, it is also what is going to come. "Avvenire" here is "inventio." It implies that invention is divine and is therefore "sacer." The second hidden thing is "consciousness." This is

not simply what is hidden in men but what is hidden "of" men. What is hidden of men is knowledge (con-scire). With a double movement, the "of" in "degli" implies belonging as detachment. Thus "coscienza" is what exceeds men. What is different "of" men and "avvenire" is what is precluded to men. Yet men's exceeding will fill the remainder of invention as *ad-venire* turns into *in-venire*. To see the "link" (*legere*) that exceeds the event is to proleptically live it; i. e., divine what is hidden. So Vico, in divining his own "falls," gives us an account of his life. In order to do so he has to go beyond his very life. Thus Vico's use of the third person which contextually works in this direction, rather than serving as a simple historical continuation of some incipit of other autobiographies, such as Chiabrera's (cf. 66-67), or as oppositional to the Cartesian "I," as Fisch remarks. Vico's critique to his own life is a "link." Vico is beyond his tomb, beyond his "written" life and speaks from there as if he were already dead. His *Vita* is a tomb, an open tomb and an open womb which generates itself. It is a reflexive operation for which the beginning is already a repetition. The "I" is already "he," the *Life of G. B. Vico* already the credible impossible life of the other: the other that is in ourselves and whose friendship we cherish beyond "dust." And with such friendship, thinking of Socrates, Vico goes beyond his *Vita*. The inequity of the sentence as expressed by Phaedrus includes the "fall" in the "judgement." Only after death is there hope. The *Life of Vico* is always being judged, and as any "lives," never equitably. Justice is a matter of the beyond.

The autobiography, or self-biography, or periautography as Carlo Lodoli preferred to call it, does not necessarily stress the subject, as Verene clearly points out. They only stress the surroundings, the place, the *topos*, since such writing's only concern is reflexive. It is the concern with itself lived as other. It stresses the irony of narration, its own irony.

We are reminded that since the nineteenth century it is a commonplace to regard every philosophy as autobiographical. (ix-x) This is an idea taken up again in the discussion of Dilthey's perspective. (48-51) Nevertheless "idiomatic" should be preferred since the reflexive aspect of the narration is part of any philosophy. And the idiomatic is linked to invention which, as for the law, is common but not communicable. Indeed one might say that the first autobiography was a hieroglyph—a first signature. Yet that signature had less to do with "being" than with "law." The *autobiography* is concerned with law because it is concerned with the "mark," with "character," with writing. The first concern of such writing is writing itself. Furthermore, it wouldn't be redundant to mention that the word autobiography is relatively new. It apparently first appeared in English, and not much earlier than the nineteenth century (cf. 53-54). Vico, as others before him, used the title stressing the word "life" and "writing"—*Vita di*

Giambattista Vico scritta da se medesimo.

One's autobiography as well as the autobiography of humanity is concerned with the forces that allow for their structure. At the same time these forces can only be known proleptically, which is tantamount to recognizing the underlying nihilistic aspect of life in general. Where life goes, its place can only be accounted for after, though it must be pre-given. In this sense, Vico's new critical art deals with our belatedness. It is like reading backwards what goes forwards. And in all *autobiography* the singular events of life are turned into the general law of that same life. The way in which Vico deals with this is represented in the "fall." The result of each fall is singular and yet it is elevated to a universal status—to be exemplary, to be law. The singularity is reinforced by connecting the fall with a particular malady. The fall and the sick body go hand in hand. What follows is a period of remission in which the sickness is the only concern for the healing person. These "falls" are signs. They represent the indelible marks of one's life. They are writing. A writing that can only be divined. And as pointed out, divination is the unmasking of what needs to be unmasked—the future as invention. Thus a rhetorical art is needed to perform the "credible impossibility" of the poetic world, that is, of the human world. And such a "making" is actually one with destruction. First of all it is the revelation of the singular as a general—a true unmasking which is equated to the destruction of the conceits, what we might call special interests. And at the same time, by such a reversal, what passes for general, universal, is actually bared to its singularity. The outcome of the operation is a "restoration" of the particular. The certain is restored as a wayfarer is restored—he is fed, he is taken care of. In this sense, Vico takes care of his falls.

Falls and sickness are interlocked in what is a critical moment. The crisis must be dealt with. And the questioning of the mark has to deal with writing. The judgment must be passed on written texts. And indeed Vico's new critical art is defined as such. The events in life, customs, etc., can be the subject of the "new science" as well as of one's *autobiography*, but first and foremost they must be writing. Vico's unmasking is based on books because books represent the fall, the conceits of humanity as such. Humanity's shortcomings are in "writing." Writing is restored its unfulfilled character. Writing which wants to be the same once and forever does not exist. Its signature is denied by its very be-coming something else each time that it tries to be itself. Writing's only concern is with its own 'falls'. Such is Vico's account for the two autobiographies written by himself and written by humanity. Both narrations are allegorical ironies of the credible impossibility of being in the world.

The Life of Giambattista Vico Written by Himself might be a "new science of narration" but only if the novelty reflects a new attitude toward

writing. Narration as writing is a reflexive act and as such it is concerned with law. Law is not "being." Jove's providence is Jove's prudence—already a juris-prudence. Jurisprudence is the product of the human mind, it is its own providence. It is writing as forces without a field to determine their influence. These forces make and dissolve the field (context) of their own determination. This is the universal language Vico speaks of—a mental language that partakes of both living and dead (languages). A language which cannot be reduced to the binary division between "langue" and "parole." There is no self-awareness on the part of the subject; indeed there is no pre-given subject in such language. This language is the *topos* to allow everything else (institutions) to be; yet it is none of them since it is not the pre-given place of being (or not being). It is different from any rhetorical argument or given topics such as God, marriage, and burial. In fact, such mental language is the language of "mind." It is a language and a mind that cannot be identified with the specific languages of men and it cannot be identified with the expression of any conceit. At the same time it is not a language that transcends all the other languages of the conceits. It is not a language according to our understanding of the word. In Vico's words, it is jurisprudence as one with mind. It is mind that allows for choice, Vico says. It is human choice at work. Yet it cannot be assimilated to any such choices. It allows for judgement. But it is not judgement. This mind (language) of jurisprudence is "nowhere." It works as difference in what is and in what is not—it allows for choices to happen. All we have is "choice" ("fall"), that is, the singular, the idiomatic; indeed as do Vico's life and philosophy begin with a fall and not simply with birth. Life begins with choices be it the fall from the ladder, in Vico's case, or the thunder, in the history of mankind. And in this process of choosing, mind is at work. The mental language is at work first of all as a sign (hieroglyph, etc), as writing and choices (falls, errors) are made in response to the reading of such signs which, like forces, push us about. Only those who do not give up and rather put up a fight will succeed in "being" as a product of themselves. This is the case for the "giants" who are authors and owners of their own "eye" ("I")—i. e., customs, altars, fields, etc.

Such mental language does not exist, since it has no place to be; and it is not Being since it precedes being—it must be before anything can be in it or not be in it. In this manner such a place is beyond the places of being(s).

The fall as a choice is an im-position just as a "character" is for Vico. Character and name are the same. They are written and they are writing. The im-position is over-, trans-, being as the "excess" of being; as what "remains" (unspoken). A character, a signature is over its own name, its own determination, imposition, framing, and is already other. This is the generative aspect of Vico's *Life*: a life which we are

still writing and which exceeds all that has been named already. Thus it is a life not yet written about a character not yet framed—a life of a name, Vico, who like Homer, though very relevant, never took place in the world.

These are the workings of providence. *Phronesis* is "the faculty of the individual to assess where he stands in a particular situation" (133-34). *Phronesis*, prudence for the ancients, is turned into *sapientia* by Vico (148). But it is a knowledge that started by dealing with what happened as if it never happened and with what had not happened as if it had already happened. This is basically Vico's definition of primeval jurisprudence. Indeed once we get well from a fall, all we are concerned with is that fall. In its extreme consequences, when we are faced with someone's death, with the death of a friend, all we can do is to mourn over it. Yet when the mourning is over all we are concerned with can only be death. This is the passage from memory to memorialization (cf. Derrida, "Psyche: Inventions of the Other" [Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1989]). Our concern with the "fall" as "death," as memorialization is the work of providence—of mind, Vico says, for which and by which everything is made. And the made is the true; the true is made (by our concern with the unavoidable). Thus the unavoidability of what might always already have happened (as "fall," "death," etc.) but never took place in the world. The *New Science* as providence at work and as the result of providential intervention is "no-place" because it might always already have been (*ignota latebat*). But the point is not to uncover it, it is to invent it—to divine it from the marks with which we are left; to invent the credible impossibility of the works of human mind whose only concern is with the "fall."

Our fall, the fall that hasn't taken place yet is all we are concerned with. Our own demise has been announced in the death of the other which now is memorialized in ourselves. Such death is the only one we have ever experienced and whose recurrence is announced by our concern. In our avoiding that death we delay our own death. Yet there is a debt we must render, for which we must give reason. And that debt concerns our own death of which the memorialization of the other's death in ourselves is the place that nurtures it by delaying it. It is our protection, our self-preservation from our only fall. By memorializing the death of the other in ourselves, we prepare for our own. In such a way our own death is already recurring before it ever took place. It cannot be avoided since we never experienced it; yet it is already taking place. And in our lives we live awaiting the moment in which it will occur, that moment in which it will return. That moment will mark our life by decreeing our death as the eternal return of the same. Meanwhile in reliving our death infinite times we relive our lives infinite times. Our lives, our names, are like each word, already

said yet spoken for the first time. We can try to avoid the falls that have already happened, but this won't protect us from those falls which have never taken place. In this sense our lives cannot have a "signature" since our lives cannot be comprehended even in the cycles of our lives. Indeed the cycle of each man's life is an infinite recurrence of itself in difference. In our expectation of the end(s) of life, we live through the end of life.

The New Art of Autobiography touches upon many of these issues which Verene chooses to present within an historical (and at times, structural) frame of reference. The *New Science* and the *Autobiography* are no exception to the rule. The binary analysis finds its way to a diagrammatic representation of the fall (174); and this movement from birth to rebirth exemplifies the tendency of the whole book towards an open-ended conclusion.

In Vico the narrative of history rather than the narrative of myth (83-84) recuperates the critical aspect of narration. However Vico must "invent himself as an historical being" (84) thus reaching a meeting ground between the two apparently opposed aspects of narration. Consequently, Vico's "life" shall become a fable.

In order to pursue the instigation, Verene juxtaposes Vico with Descartes and with Augustine—less so with Rousseau and not at all with Nietzsche. These contrasting figures either by their presence or absence delimit the field of action of the present study which rests on the "Vichean perspective." (114). The author is well aware of the danger inherent in interpretation (126). In fact, by judging what is unfamiliar by what is familiar (NS, #122), one can turn interpretation into those same conceits that Vico intends to destroy. The way Verene chooses is a third one, namely "to enter into Vico's thought to discover the lever and fulcrum Vico uses to lift the world." (126). The legitimacy of this third way lies in Vico's invitation to the reader to meditate his own *New Science*. What is not stated by the justification is that Vico tells the reader that because of this, he will feel God-like and will experience a divine pleasure. Nothing is said about translating such meditations into applications. This is so because any application is an act of translation which presupposes communication, homogeneity and continuity with regard to both the fields of analysis and the method. In this dimension, understanding is actually the only reason for all interpretations. The attention of the reader is so focused on his goal that he will tend to overlook the singular movements operated in the text at hand. To enter into Vico's thought is tantamount to putting oneself in Vico's place, playing Vico's part and coming out with the correct reading of the part according to the author's mind who preserved his intention in his works. This is not simple common sense. It is the adherence to a conceit that resists to be seen as such. And the most authoritative formulation is in Leibniz's assertion that *nihil est sine*

ratione—except nihil, of course. This implies that a new art of criticism which identifies the crises of human history must be a radical criticism of the foundation of this same history. And indeed Vico's criticism starts with the power of the *nihil*: the "thunder" and the "fall." To enter Vico's thought is first of all to think again this very thought—the only one indeed since *jovis omnia plena*. The conceits arose as soon as men forgot this.

The connection between *fabula* and *historia* seems to be using narrative rather than being narrative. For Verene the new critical art is "meditation that brings the philological certainties of history together with the philosophical history of ideas" (157). This allows for the reading of Vico's *Life* as a fable in as much as it recognizes the relevance of the myth. And the proof for this is to be found in Vico's willing mistakes throughout his narration. Verene recuperates these "mis-" by reading in them a perfectly hidden architecture made up of all the possible permutations of a given data (cf., Ch. 5), and so follows the lengthy explanation of the hidden meanings of the number 70 and its readings starting from the speculation on Vico's misgiven birthdate (177-85). To enter into Vico's thought has turned into finding Vico's recondite wisdom whose power, once released, leaves us with a cabalistic universe.

The radical question about the relevance of the fable at the beginning of it all is not posed; it is simply traced back to other ideas of fables. In this sense the *Autobiography* of Vico, at best, turns into an exercise of a method avoiding the major issues of authority, text and history as part of fable. Vico says that there is no book before his *New Science* (NS, # 330) and Verene suggests that as odd as this may seem it is linked to a reference to Descartes (211) and it is justified by the fact that no book is endowed with such an original method of narrative. The attention still falls on the arrangement of the book, on the texture as a structural entity rather than on its grammatological implications. Vico's repetitions are not all part of an infinitely limited universe. They are the impossible reiteration of the "fall" in ever-differing contexts. Metaphysics is concerned with its own modifications and Vico's *New Science* is concerned with its own language. The *Autobiography* is no exception. And the writing of the *Autobiography* is our writing's concern. Verene misses the opportunity to complete his otherwise keen reading by purposely avoiding such a path. Indeed Verene asserts that to focus on writing as the only subject of an autobiography is equivalent to not having a "life" at all (cf. reference to Augustine, 99). By concluding with Joyce, Verene, who strikes out in the right direction, still avoids bringing his insights to their extreme consequences. His thematic concern identifies the direct presence of Vico in *Finnegans Wake* (227-31) and leads to the statement that "No more complicated a commentary is likely to be written on Vico, who in Joyce's hands becomes

himself the symbol for the complete speech of the human world." (228) This comment is very close to asserting that Vico's presence in Joyce's work is only in language. Vico's immortality is not at stake; there is only writing. No comparison is possible: only the singularity of writing faces those must write about it.

In preparing for a death that never took place, we live a life we have never lived, and we speak in a language we have never spoken as we read in a language we have forgotten.