7. GIAMBATTISTA VICO'S NEW SCIENCE OF THE COMMON NATURE OF THE NATIONS

Donald Phillip Verene

Giambattista Vico was born at Naples on 23 June 1668, the sixth of eight children of Antonio de Vico of Maddaloni and Candida Masullo. His father was a farmer’s son who moved from the country to Naples about 1656, working first as an apprentice in a print shop and then opening a bookstore that was the least of about forty bookstores in the street of San Biagio dei Librai, part of a system of streets called Spaccanapoli that split the old city of Naples. His mother, Antonio’s second wife, was the daughter of Giambattista Masullo, a Naples carriage-maker. The family lived and slept in a three-by-six meter room above the store and in accord with the custom of the day meals were cooked on a portable stove in the street. In a society governed by aristocracy, power, and status, these origins are remarkable, given Vico’s later success in obtaining a university career.

Vico remained in Naples in both his early years and the years of his university teaching, residing at various addresses in the same area of the city in which he was born. He left Naples only once, when he served for nine years (1686–95) as tutor to the children of the Rocca family at their castle at Vatolla in the Cilento, a three-day carriage ride south of Naples. During this period he made visits to Naples, travelling with the Roccas to their residences in Portici and Naples. Although Vico attended a Jesuit grammar school and was in and out of more advanced formal study, including attendance for two months when he was sixteen at a law course given privately by Francesco Verde, Vico regarded himself as and was an autodidact. While at Vatolla he pursued a course of self-directed study, having access to a good library in the nearby Franciscan convent of Santa Maria della Pietà. In addition during these nine years records show he officially matriculated in jurisprudence at the University of Naples and in 1694, at age 26, he received a degree in both civil and canon law (doctor in utroque).

In 1699, at age 31, Vico obtained appointment at the University as professor of Latin Eloquence, a position he was to hold until he was 73 in 1741, when by his request he was officially succeeded in his professorship by his son Gennaro. On his appointment to the University Vico married Teresa
Caterina Destito, the daughter of a neighboring family, who was analfabetica and thus obliged to put a cross on the marriage record. The marriage produced eight children, three of whom died in infancy. In addition to Gennaro, the most notable of the children was Luisa, born one year after the marriage, to whom Vico taught liberal arts at home and who later achieved some minor success in writing poetry.

The duty of Vico’s chair of rhetoric, besides delivering an address to open the academic year, was the preparation of young students to enter the law. Vico wrote and taught his own Latin Institutes. The decisive event in Vico’s career was his unfair defeat, in 1723 at age 55, in the concurso for the morning chair of civil law. Vico’s loss was the result of academic politics, the chair being awarded to Domenico Gentile of Bari, whose only book was later withdrawn from the press for plagiarism. As a result of this loss Vico felt free to cease writing works in Latin and to write the New Science in Tuscan Italian. He had produced his large work on Universal Law in Latin in the 1720s as preparation for the chair of civil law, which is in essence a first version of the central ideas of his new science of the common nature of the nations.

Vico published the New Science in two versions, one in 1725, known subsequently as the First New Science, and one in 1730, revised in 1744 and known as the Second New Science. In 1735, at age 67, Vico was appointed Royal Historiographer by Charles of Bourbon. Vico declared that with the exception of some passages of the first version he wished to be known only for the second, definitive version. He was seeing the revised edition of this through the press at his death. Vico died during the night of 22–23 January 1744, at age 75.

These are the basic facts of Vico’s personal and professional life. They offer some immediate insight into Vico as a figure living and writing in 18th-century Naples, but more than what can be told of his life in this brief sketch, Vico has left his readers a unique work, an autobiography that offers a beginning point and a key to the comprehension of his thought. Since the word “autobiography” did not exist in Italian or any modern European language at the time, this work is titled Vita di Giambattista Vico scritta da se medesimo (Life of Giambattista Vico written by himself). It was published in 1728 in the first volume of a Venetian quarterly, Raccolta d’opuscoli scientifici e filologici, as part of a project by its editors to have Italian thinkers who had made important discoveries write accounts of how they had come to them. Vico is not only the founder of the new science of history, he is the founder of the new art of autobiography. The Vico scholar and translator Max Fisch brings out this point: “Aside from