

THREE CRITICS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

ISAIAH BERLIN WAS BORN IN RIGA, now capital of Latvia, in 1909. When he was six, his family moved to Russia; there in 1917, in Petrograd, he witnessed both Revolutions – Social Democratic and Bolshevik. In 1921 he and his parents came to England, and he was educated at St Paul's School, London, and Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

At Oxford he was a Fellow of All Souls, a Fellow of New College, Professor of Social and Political Theory, and founding President of Wolfson College. He also held the Presidency of the British Academy. In addition to *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, his main published works are *Karl Marx*, *Russian Thinkers*, *Concepts and Categories*, *Against the Current*, *Personal Impressions*, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, *The Sense of Reality*, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, *The Roots of Romanticism*, *The Power of Ideas*, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, *Liberty*, *The Soviet Mind* and *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*. As an exponent of the history of ideas he was awarded the Erasmus, Lippincott and Agnelli Prizes; he also received the Jerusalem Prize for his lifelong defence of civil liberties. He died in 1997.

Henry Hardy, a Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford, is one of Isaiah Berlin's Literary Trustees. He has edited (or co-edited) many other books by Berlin, including the first three of four volumes of his letters, and is currently working on the remaining volume.

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*For further information about Isaiah Berlin visit
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THREE CRITICS OF
THE ENLIGHTENMENT

VICO, HAMANN, HERDER



ISAIAH BERLIN

Edited by Henry Hardy

Second Edition

Foreword by Jonathan Israel

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FOREWORD

Jonathan Israel

ISAIAH BERLIN (1909–1997) abandoned conventional philosophy towards the end of the Second World War, and amidst the incipient gloom of the Cold War turned instead to what he called ‘the history of ideas’. In doing so he not only changed direction, entering an area new to him, but introduced into the Anglo-American world a field of study previously largely confined to Italian and German scholarship, becoming one of the founders of ‘intellectual history’ as we know it today.

He began extending and reorientating a discipline, ‘the history of ideas’, which in his case, as he was no historian, remained somewhat separate both from ‘intellectual history’ conceived as basically cultural and social history and from ‘history of philosophy’ as taught especially in university philosophy departments, focusing on the history of philosophers’ ideas in their relation to each other, largely abstracted from the wider historical process. Berlin’s ‘history of ideas’, however, was distinctly nearer to the first than the second, as he was more interested in the reception and the political and social implications of ideas than in their internal logical relationship to each other.

His originality lay in exploring the possibilities of major ideas that played a part in history – less as an academic field than as a tool for commentary on contemporary affairs, and indeed for philosophising. The fragmented manner in which he published his insights and his preference for presenting his work in the form of essays, several of which became celebrated and widely

quoted, but often in isolation from each other, delayed somewhat an appreciation of the full range, coherence and significance of his thought. Although he began to achieve international fame as an intellectual historian in the later 1950s, only after his death in 1997, and with the subsequent editing and publication of much writing discarded or left unpublished earlier, did it become fully evident that Berlin had, in a meaningful way, succeeded as a philosopher after all.

Among Berlin's most celebrated essays, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', originally delivered as a public lecture in Oxford in 1958, had a particular relevance to his approach to the Enlightenment. The essay pivots on the fundamental distinction he brilliantly elaborates there, with permanent consequences for the study of political philosophy, between 'negative' and 'positive' liberty. Negative liberty, with its conceptual roots in Hobbes, prioritises 'liberty from' interference by other people or institutions, seeks to cut back or minimise the power of the State (and authority more generally), and to leave the individual as far as possible free from outside constraints, free to pursue 'ends' as an individual in his or her own way. Negative liberty he contrasted strikingly with positive liberty, which includes both self-rule – individuals being in control of their own actions – and the best *use* of freedom. Although any political philosophy must engage with both negative and positive liberty, different political philosophies put more emphasis on the one than on the other. Those thinkers, like Rousseau, who lean towards positive liberty tend to prize citizenship as a means to create a better or higher form of individual and society, viewing liberty as a politically, socially and culturally elevating and ameliorating process. The friction between the two kinds of liberty Berlin viewed as a tension certainly between society and the individual and perhaps also within the individual – between, on the one hand, the aspiration to be governed by purely rational considerations, and, on the other, the pull of the passions. On the collective level, the two kinds of liberty collide

because social ideals and what is judged the common good frequently diverge from what people actually want. The danger here is that ‘Liberty, so far from being incompatible with authority, may become virtually identical with it.’¹

Berlin’s fundamental distinction had an immediate impact on intellectual debate. His elaboration of the ‘Two Concepts’ owed much to his profound preoccupation with what he saw as the inevitable friction, the element of contradiction, between individual freedom and ideals such as equality and justice, especially social justice. He acknowledged that his schema creates a certain tension also between ‘privacy’ and ‘participation’, but fended off criticism that he was helping to erode the basis for the latter, and hence commitment to representative democracy. Even so, while he went to some pains to stress that we need both kinds of liberty, and must in practice strike a reasonable balance between them, at the time contemporaries mostly interpreted his stance as a contribution to the struggle between Anglo-American notions of liberty and democracy on the one side, and utopian, potentially totalitarian visions of human improvement, such as Marxism, on the other. His ideas became a weapon in the fight between right and left, both of which to some extent neglected the real breadth of his liberalism, his admiration for the American New Deal introduced by Roosevelt, and his commitment to social democracy.

Participants in the intellectual debate of the late 1950s and the 1960s over Berlin’s ‘Two Concepts’ liberalism also often failed sufficiently to appreciate the intimate and lasting connection between his political thought and his deep preoccupation with the Enlightenment. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Enlightenment appeared to most a limited, for English-speaking countries relatively unimportant, historical phenomenon, predominantly

¹ ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford and New York, 2002), 194.

French, and confined to the eighteenth century. Few recognised the Enlightenment's continuing relevance and significance, and fewer still understood, in an era preoccupied with the struggle between Communism and Western liberal values, that the Enlightenment would eventually re-emerge as the single most vital and fundamental intellectual issue in the post-Fascist and post-Communist world. Berlin, however, was convinced that the Enlightenment is not just basic to modernity, but particularly inclined to stress that 'Freedom is not freedom to do what is irrational, or stupid, or wrong',¹ and to believe that forcing our 'empirical selves into the right pattern is no tyranny, but liberation',² and that this readily leads to 'illiberal conclusions'.³ Over the decades Berlin continued to develop into a perceptive, thoughtful and often profound commentator on Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment. Ironically, this rendered him in the end possibly more lastingly significant and memorable as a philosopher than many of the technically more proficient philosophers who in the middle decades of the century considered him a philosophical failure.

The Enlightenment, Berlin's extensive reading convinced him, confronts the modern intellectual, and society generally, with a profound difficulty. Personally he neither identified with, nor sought to promote, Enlightenment or Counter-Enlightenment. Rather he came to believe that the Enlightenment, for all its internal divergences and variety, constituted a single movement of great contemporary as well as historical significance, but one seething with inner tensions and contradictions, pitting our real selves against projected ideal or would-be selves in a ceaseless battle. His objective was to separate what he deemed valuable in the Enlightenment, such as its attacks on dogmatism and overreaching religious authority, and the campaign for tolerance, from what he considered dangerous and potentially despotic in

¹ *ibid.*

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.* 201.

the efforts of the *philosophes* to reform society and produce a new and higher form of individual. He granted that Condorcet was ‘one of the best men who ever lived’¹ but in his ‘Two Concepts’ essay pointedly questions whether his central contention, that ‘Nature binds truth, happiness and virtue together by an indissoluble chain’,² is actually true.

Berlin did not introduce the concept of Counter-Enlightenment into intellectual debate so much as redefine it, conceiving of this crucial historical reaction to the Enlightenment less in the religious and political terms of the conservative writers who opposed the Enlightenment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than as an intellectual quest to identify the Enlightenment’s weaknesses and dangers and explore the continuing significance of these alleged defects. It was in this sense, viewing the Counter-Enlightenment as a sceptical check and testing-ground for the far-reaching claims of the Enlightenment, that Berlin promoted the Counter-Enlightenment as a still relevant and indeed indispensable antidote to what he saw as the Enlightenment’s problem areas.

The Enlightenment’s central failing, in Berlin’s view – though less in the case of Voltaire, whom he thought right but unoriginal, than in that of writers such as Condorcet, Holbach, Helvétius and Rousseau – was its tendency to push universalism and the oneness of mankind too far. The Enlightenment, he believed, tended to depict human nature as unchanging and permanent, regarding good and bad in human societies as fixed and eternal values. The *philosophes* believed that by ‘enlightening’, by attacking and destroying prejudice, credulity and uncritical adherence to tradition, men could be brought to understand more clearly what they really needed and wanted, to gain happiness and

¹ *ibid.* 212.

² *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (Paris, 1795), 366; *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (London, 1795), 355.

be morally and politically improved. Enlightenment thinkers habitually construed conflicts of ideology and values as battles between the enlightened and unenlightened, the aware and the ignorant, truth and falsity, when such struggles, then as now, were really conflicts between rival values within systems, or between different value systems with divergent backgrounds and histories, each of which, arguably, possesses its own independent validity and authenticity.

To preserve human freedom and dignity, as well as proper philosophical judgement and academic objectivity, a healthy dose of 'value pluralism' is needed, and a willingness to detach ourselves to a degree from all ideologies and value systems. At the same time, though, Berlin stoutly resisted all suggestion that his fervent pluralism, stressing the possibilities for conflict and different stances within a broadly unified moral universe, amounts to 'moral relativism'. Emphasising the incompatibilities and conflicts between moral values within and between cultures, he contends, is by no means the same as moral relativism. Groups, or one and the same individual, may be forced to make choices at different times, or at the same time, in which universally valid moral considerations conflict or prove irreconcilable. Cultures can be different without being hermetically sealed off from each other, in conflict while sharing essentially the same notions of right and wrong. The question how clear and convincing Berlin's distinction between pluralism and relativism actually is still remains a point of debate today.

Consonantly with his value pluralism, Berlin thought the Counter-Enlightenment an indispensable component of our contemporary intellectual world. The three thinkers he discusses here – Vico, Hamann and Herder – were to him in some sense intellectual heroes of modernity, but not because he thought they rejected Enlightenment values in general. They were not, and he did not consider them, enemies of toleration, freedom of thought and expression, or (except in Hamann's case) scientific

endeavour. To him they were figures of lasting relevance because they focused on the particular, the historical, and what makes peoples and human traditions different. They were outstandingly valuable contributors to philosophy, being among the first to make mankind conscious of the inadequacies and failings that Berlin believed to be inherent in the optimistic rationalism of the Enlightenment. Many scholars today would dispute whether Vico and Herder, at least, were opponents of the Enlightenment to the extent Berlin tended to think. In recent years the Enlightenment credentials of both thinkers, and sometimes even those of Hamann, have been far more recognised than they once were. But while Berlin may have overstated the anti-Enlightenment thrust at any rate in Vico and Herder, this in no way detracts from the continuing significance and interest of his questioning of the Enlightenment's credentials, his identification of its vulnerable points, of which his exposition of the ideas of Vico, Hamann and Herder forms the most essential part.

Vico's emphasis on the particular, the historical and the evolving character of human societies, cultures and traditions seemed to Berlin to be groundbreaking as a new vision of the role of the historical sciences, and to constitute a valid criticism of the Enlightenment. Berlin by no means ignores Hamann's commitment to a personal God and his stress on revelation, but what he finds important and relevant in his writing is the attack on 'reason', particularly when conceived by Enlightenment secular philosophers as the common tool of all humanity. If reason were the common possession Enlightenment thinkers envisage, 'there would not have been so many conflicting philosophies all claiming', as Berlin expressed it, 'to be justified by the same faculty of reason'.¹ It is Hamann's vision of Enlightenment rationalism as a cold, narrow device, constricting and fatally detracting from the fullness and richness of human life and experience, that impresses

¹ 372 below.

him. Herder, Berlin came to admit, 'had deep affinities with the *Aufklärung*, and he did write with optimism and eloquence about man's ascent to ideal *Humanität*, and uttered sentiments to which Lessing could have subscribed, no less Goethe.'¹ But the theme at the centre of Herder's *oeuvre*, and still vital to us, Berlin believed, was 'that one must not judge one culture by the criteria of another; that differing civilisations are different growths, pursue different goals, embody different ways of living, are dominated by different attitudes to life'.²

As early as 1960 Isaiah Berlin proposed publishing his studies of Vico, Herder and Counter-Enlightenment thought as *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, but with the Savoyard anti-revolutionary writer Joseph de Maistre, not Hamann, as the third 'critic'. Berlin met with considerable difficulty in completing his task. The common elements linking these writers were clear to him from the outset. But there were continually new aspects to unravel. The essays devoted to Vico and Herder (originally published in 1960 and 1965), which comprise the larger part of this volume, finally appeared, after considerable revision, in 1976 as *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas*. Berlin abandoned his text on Hamann, and it was forgotten until retrieved by Henry Hardy, after a good deal of searching, and published in 1993 under the title *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*. In publishing the two texts together, in corrected form, in 2000, Hardy performed the valuable task of rescuing highly relevant material that had been lost as well as restoring the original title and much of the wider scope of Berlin's project.

Now we can see the full implications of Isaiah Berlin's efforts to convince us of his Counter-Enlightenment's relevance. He was right to contend that the French Revolution was rooted in the Enlightenment, 'founded on the notion of timeless truths

¹ 291 below.

² 292 below.

given to the faculty of reason with which all men are endowed'.¹ He was right to say, as he does in the 'Two Concepts' essay, that, in its Jacobin phase at least, that Revolution was 'an eruption of the desire for the "positive" freedom of collective self-direction', leading to a 'severe restriction of individual freedoms'.² But was he also justified in concluding that the Enlightenment's dream of establishing a harmonious society on the basis of what he called 'a peaceful universalism and a rational humanitarianism'³ was foredoomed to hideous perversion and inadequacy, due to the failure to grasp the essential complexity of men and societies and the ineradicable clash of irreconcilable values? Only time will tell.

¹ 298–9 below.

² *op. cit.* (xi/1), 208.

³ 299 below.

EDITOR'S PREFACE

Next year we are publishing a book by Sir Isaiah Berlin called *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*.

Elizabeth Jennings of the Hogarth Press to the
Italian Institute, London, 31 May 1960

BETWEEN 1960 AND 1971 A SOMEWHAT disorienting series of announcements in the seasonal lists of the Hogarth Press increasingly tantalised the many readers who looked forward to any new publication by Isaiah Berlin. The first in the series appeared in the catalogue for autumn 1960: headed *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, it promulgated a book comprising studies of Giambattista Vico, Johann Gottfried Herder and Joseph de Maistre.¹

Not only did this book not materialise in this form or according to the projected timescale, but its contents underwent a sequence of transformations that amounted almost to a case of Chinese whispers – almost, because just one element in the original conception, namely the study of Vico, did continuously survive all the changes, and duly appeared, rejoined after an interim absence by the essay on Herder, in the volume finally published sixteen years later as *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas*.

The intervening stages may be briefly summarised. In autumn 1965 Herder was replaced by Johann Georg Hamann. In spring

¹ The contract, dated 31 December 1959, specifies only essays on Vico and Maistre.

1967 *Three Critics* was supplanted by two other proposed books, *Three Studies in the Philosophy of History* (essays on Vico and Herder, together with ‘The Concept of Scientific History’)¹ and *Two Enemies of the Enlightenment* (Hamann and Maistre). In autumn 1968 *Three Studies* became simply *Studies*, with the addition of a fourth essay, on Montesquieu.² In autumn 1971 *Studies* was cut back to two essays, becoming – and remaining until publication in 1976 – *Vico and Herder*. *Two Enemies* did not reappear, though I was able to publish its intended contents as ‘Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism’ (in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*) and *The Magus of the North* (Hamann) in the 1990s.³

This compressed account of some of the vicissitudes that have attended the publication of Isaiah Berlin’s work⁴ provides a basis for explaining the genesis of the present volume, which rescued his original title and the intention that underlay it (though not quite his original contents) forty years on. As will be seen, each of the three studies collected here was at one stage or another due to form part of a volume under the present title, devoted to key figures of the Counter-Enlightenment. The views held by

¹ The latter study was eventually included in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy (London, 1978; New York, 1979; 2nd ed., Princeton, 2013).

² Later included in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London, 1979; New York, 1980; 2nd ed., Princeton, 2013).

³ *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London, 1990; New York, 1991; 2nd ed., Princeton, 2013) and *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism* (London, 1993; New York, 1994), both edited by Henry Hardy.

⁴ Berlin was himself only too aware of the extent to which he tested the endurance of his publishers by the long delays, the unrealistic predictions and the changes of plan that characterised his experience of authorship: as he wrote to Hugo Brunner at the Hogarth Press on 24 July 1975, ‘anyone dealing with me must be armed with considerable reserves of patience’. That was no exaggeration, but the eventual outcome always more than compensated for the preceding frustrations.

the Enlightenment's opponents were a lifetime's preoccupation of Berlin's, and their examination produced some of his best and most characteristic work. For this reason, as well as because he had for so many years hoped to publish a book that would bring a number of his essays in this field together, it was fitting that his long-deferred project should have been realised at last.

The opportunity to do this arose because in their original published incarnations the three studies included here were either out of print or soon to become so. Had one been starting from scratch, one might have devised a larger selection of studies by Berlin devoted to anti-Enlightenment thinkers, and such a volume might have signalled more obviously the centrality of this theme in his intellectual agenda. But the other possible candidates, including the three other essays mentioned in the Hogarth announcements, were and still are all readily available in collections that are still in print, and likely to remain so for some time to come. It seemed best, then, to reissue the less available material, without duplicating essays from other volumes. (Besides, the titles of those other volumes – *Against the Current* and *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* – themselves reflect, if less perspicuously, the anti-Enlightenment tendency of some of the thinkers examined in their pages.)

Had one been starting from scratch with these particular studies, one would have printed them in the chronological order of their subjects' lives, as indicated in the book's subtitle. But since Vico and Herder were already linked by the introduction specially written by Berlin for *Vico and Herder* – and reproduced here – it seemed inappropriate to disturb their adjacency.

In a letter to the poet and publishers' reader Elizabeth Jennings dated 8 March 1960, written in response to her request for a description of *Three Critics* to appear in the Hogarth Press catalogue, Berlin describes his subjects and expresses the book's linking theme in a way that fits this descendant volume equally well:

I hope the book may be called *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* [...]. The first [study is] on [...] Giambattista Vico, an attempt to deal with a thinker of genius, unrecognised in his own day and then forgotten and rediscovered at regular intervals until our own time, to which he has more to say than to his own age. The second study is concerned with the far better known Johann Gottfried Herder, the founder of modern nationalism [...]. My thesis is that what unites these [...] writers is their antipathy to the fundamental ideas of the French Enlightenment, and the depth and permanent force of their critical reflections on them. [...] The issue between the advocates of the Enlightenment and these critics is today at least as crucial as it was in its beginnings, and the fashion in which the rival theses were stated in their original form is clearer, simpler and bolder than at any subsequent time. Vico's conception of history, culture and society [and] Herder's contrast between scientific rationalism and the properties that create civilisations and make them intelligible [...] seem more realistic and relevant to the central issues of our time than the generally accepted doctrines which form the main stream of European thought.

For this eventual realisation of Berlin's plan for a volume entitled *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, first published in London and Princeton in 2000, I took the opportunity to make a number of editorial revisions in the section on Vico, and in particular to check and amend quotations and references, adding or amplifying the latter where appropriate. Translations were also scrutinised, and sometimes added where this seemed helpful. The essay on Herder had already received similar treatment for its appearance in Berlin's *The Proper Study of Mankind*,¹ and it is the version from that volume, *mutatis mutandis*, that appears here. The study of Hamann was reproduced in essentially the

¹ *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (London, 1997; New York, 1998; 2nd ed., London, 2013).

same form that it took when first published, with the addition of the foreword specially written by the author in 1994 for the German edition.¹

Very few of my editorial changes affect the substance of what Berlin wrote, but perhaps I may be permitted to advise any readers who wish to follow up the references in the footnotes that it will be worth their while to consult the revised versions of the essays on Vico and Herder rather than, or at least alongside, the previous versions; by this means they will save themselves a number of problematic, sometimes fruitless, attempts to track down quotations or other sourced remarks.

New to this edition are the foreword by Jonathan Israel and the appendix. The latter comprises two of Berlin's many additional pieces on Vico, an addendum to a third, a passage on Hamann's origins not included in *The Magus of the North*, and correspondence with Quentin Skinner, Mark Lilla and Gwen Griffith-Dickson that throws further light on Berlin's attitude to his subjects.

Since this new edition of the present collection has been reset, its pagination differs from that of the first edition, and from that of the two separate volumes it combined. This will cause some inconvenience to readers who wish to follow up references to earlier incarnations of the essays. I have therefore posted a concordance of all these editions at http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/tce/concordance.html, so that references to one can readily be converted into references to another.

Leon Pompa helped me prodigiously with Vico, and my debt to him is especially great. Andrew Fairbairn, Roger Hausheer (who in addition kindly read the proofs of the first edition), Michael Inwood, Raymond Klibansky, T. J. Reed and Donald Phillip Verene assisted with various recalcitrant problems, and

¹ *Der Magus in Norden* (Berlin, 1995). The first draft of this foreword was composed by me at Berlin's request, but he then characteristically rewrote most of it, I am glad to say.

Josephine von Zitzewitz with questions of translation from German. Martin Liddy read the typescript of the second edition to its advantage. I am grateful to them all, be they now alive or dead.

*Henry Hardy
Heswall, March 2013*

NOTE ON REFERENCES

PAGE REFERENCES ARE MAINLY given as plain numerals. References to multi-volume works take the form xx 326 (i.e. vol. 20, p. 346); when a volume is bound in more than one part, the part number is given after an oblique stroke, thus: xx/2 (vol. 20, part 2). Line references, given only when printed in the source, follow a page number directly after a full point, with no intervening space, thus: xx 326.29 (vol. 20, p. 326, line 29). Notes referred to in the form 56/8 (i.e. p. 56 note 8) are in the present volume unless otherwise specified. Conventions specific to each of the three critics follow.

VICO

References for quotations from Vico cite the relevant page (or, in the case of the *New Science*, paragraph) from the relevant volume of the Scrittori d'Italia edition of Vico's works:

G. B. Vico, *Opere*, ed. Benedetto Croce, Giovanni Gentile and Fausto Nicolini, 8 vols in 11 (Bari, 1911–41: Laterza)

This edition is referred to hereafter as *Opere*. Page references to vol. v, which contains Vico's autobiography, are to the second edition of that volume (1929), which was reset throughout, so that its pagination differs unsystematically from that of the first edition (1911).¹ References for quotations from Vico's main

¹ For completeness I should perhaps mention that a revised edition of vol.

works do not mention *Opere* by name, but use the following abbreviations:

- A Autobiography (in *Opere* v)
- DA *De antiquissima italorum sapientia ex linguae latinae originibus eruenda* (in *Opere* i)
- DN *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (in *Opere* i)
- DU *De universi iuris uno principio et fine uno* (in *Opere* ii/1)
- IO Inaugural Orations (in *Opere* i)
- NS *Scienza nuova*, 1744 edition (*Opere* iv, in two parts)
- NS_I The first (1725) edition of the *Scienza nuova* (in *Opere* iii)

Wherever possible (except in the case of NS and NS_I, where the paragraph numbers in the Italian edition are also used in the English translations), the page reference to the Italian edition is followed, after an oblique stroke, by a page reference to the relevant English translation from the following list (though the actual translations used by the author, except in the case of A and NS, are of varying origin, and sometimes his own):

- A *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin (Ithaca, New York, 1944: Cornell University Press; reprinted with corrections 1944 [*sic*]; reissued in 1963 [Great Seal Books, with further corrections] and 1975); the pagination is not affected by the corrections
- DA Giambattista Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language*, trans. L. M. Palmer (Ithaca and London, 1988: Cornell University Press)

iv (1928), the *Scienza nuova* of 1744, appeared in 1942 – rather misleadingly called a third edition, because the 1928 edition was itself a revision of an earlier edition by Nicolini. But this does not affect the citation system explained here, since this work is referred to by paragraph, and the paragraph numbering was not altered.

- DN Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, trans. Elio Gianturco (Indianapolis etc., 1965: Bobbs-Merrill; reissued with additional material, Ithaca and London, 1990: Cornell University Press); the pagination of the translation is not affected by the additions, but Gianturco's introduction has been repaginated, and references are to the 1990 edition (subtract xii for a reference to the 1965 edition)
- IO Giambattista Vico, *On Humanistic Education (Six Inaugural Orations, 1699–1707)*, trans. Giorgio A. Pinton and Arthur W. Shippee (Ithaca and London, 1993: Cornell University Press)
- NS *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, New York, 1968: Cornell University Press); this is a revised edition of a translation of Vico's third edition (1744) first published in 1948, and uses Nicolini's paragraph numbers; there is also a 1984 reissue, adding 'Practic of the New Science'. Berlin tended to use the 1948 edition: where relevant his quotations have been brought into line with the 1968 edition.
- NS₁ *Vico: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Leon Pompa (Cambridge, 1982: Cambridge University Press), which contains translations of large extracts from NS₁, as well as alternative translations of parts of DA, DN and NS

Thus 'DA 145/60' indicates that the passage in question is from *De antiquissima*, and is to be found on p. 145 of the first volume of *Opere*, while a translation appears on p. 60 of Palmer's volume. References to translators' introductions and notes cite only one page-number, e.g. 'A 40', 'DN xliii'; in the case of NS, 'p.' is added to make clear that the reference is not, on such an occasion, to a paragraph, e.g. 'NS p. xxxix'.

HERDER

References for quotations from Herder are to *Herder's sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan and others (Berlin, 1877–1913: Weidmann), by volume and page, thus: viii 252. Herder's text is riddled with emphases (indicated in print by wide letter-spacing) which are ignored in Berlin's quotations.¹

HAMANN

References to Hamann's writings, and to letters written to Hamann, are to the following editions:

- Works Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Joseph Nadler (Vienna, 1949–57: Herder), 6 vols. The last volume is an invaluable analytical index.
- Letters Johann Georg Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Walther Ziesemer and Arthur Henkel (Wiesbaden and Frankfurt, 1955–79: Insel), 7 vols. Unfortunately there is as yet no subject index to these volumes, and no consolidated name index.

These editions are referred to as W and B respectively, and quoted passages are cited by volume, page and first line, thus: W iii 145.13. Inconsistently (see Herder above), I have reproduced Hamann's emphases as italics, and in one case (given extra emphasis by Hamann) in bold type.

¹ The same applies to Vico, whose translators do not reproduce his ubiquitous emphases.

VICO AND HERDER

To the memory of Leonard Woolf
1880-1969

I cannot deny that what interests me most, both about Vico and Herder, are the ideas which still seem to me to be living, hares that are still running, issues that are of permanent concern, at least of lasting concern, to other societies.

The thing to me about both Vico and Herder is that they opened windows on to new prospects. Nothing is ever more marvellous, and men who do it are rightly excited, and indeed overwhelmed.

IB to Quentin Skinner, 15 March 1976

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

THESE ESSAYS ORIGINATE in lectures delivered respectively to the Italian Institute in London in 1957–8 and to Johns Hopkins University in 1964. The original version of the essay on Vico¹ was published in *Art and Ideas in Eighteenth-Century Italy* (Rome, 1960: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura); that on Herder appeared in Earl R. Wasserman (ed.), *Aspects of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1965: Johns Hopkins Press), and was later reprinted with minor modifications in *Encounter*, July and August 1965. Both essays have since been revised, and the first has been considerably expanded. I should like to take this opportunity of thanking Dr Leon Pompa for discussing with me his views of Vico, particularly Vico's conception of science and knowledge, and Professor Roy Pascal for an illuminating letter about Herder – from both of these I have greatly profited. Dr Pompa's book on Vico² unfortunately appeared only after my book was already in proof, too late to enable me to make use of it here.

As will be plain from the references in the text, I have relied on the admirable translation of Vico's *Scienza nuova* by Professors T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch for the quotations from, and references to, it in this book. My thanks are also due to Professors B. Feldman and R. D. Richardson, Roy Pascal and F. M. Barnard for the use of their renderings of texts by Herder

¹ [Treated in this edition as two separate essays rather than as a single essay in two parts.]

² Leon Pompa, *Vico: A Study of the 'New Science'* (Cambridge, 1975: Cambridge University Press).

quoted in this work. My debt to Professor Barnard's excellent anthology, *Herder on Social and Political Culture*,¹ is particularly great: some of his renderings are reproduced verbatim, others in a form somewhat altered by me. I also wish to thank Mr Francis Graham-Harrison for his valuable help in reading the proofs of this book, Mr Hugo Brunner of the Hogarth Press for the care, courtesy and above all infinite patience displayed by him in his dealings with me, and finally Mrs Patricia Utechin, my secretary, for generous and unflagging help when it was most needed.

I.B.

July 1975

¹ Cambridge, 1969: Cambridge University Press.

INTRODUCTION

HISTORIANS ARE CONCERNED WITH the discovery, description and explanation of the social aspects and consequences of what men have done and suffered. But the lines between description, explanation and analysis, selection and interpretation of facts or events or their characteristics, are not clear, and cannot be made so without doing violence to the language and concepts that we normally use. Goethe remarked long ago that no statement of fact is free from theory; and even though some conceptions of what shall count as fact are less theory-laden than others, yet there is no complete consensus on this. Criteria of what constitutes a fact differ between fields of knowledge and between those who engage in them. Even within one field, history for instance, there are obvious differences in this regard between Christian and pagan historians, or post-Renaissance historians of different outlooks; what was incontrovertible evidence for Bossuet was not so for Gibbon, what constitutes a historical fact is not identical for Ranke, Michelet, Macaulay, Guizot, Dilthey. It is not the same past upon which nationalists and Marxists, clericals and liberals, appear to be gazing; the differences are even wider when it comes to selection and interpretation. This is equally true of the methods of those who rely principally upon quantitative and statistical methods as opposed to those who engage in imaginative reconstruction; of writers guided, not always consciously, by the maxims of this or that school of social psychology, or sociology, or philosophy of culture, or those who find illumination in the doctrines of functional anthropology or psychoanalysis or structuralist theories of language or imaginative literature.

These essays examine the work of two thinkers whose ideas played a major part in transforming the canons of selection and interpretation of historical facts, and thereby affected the view of the facts themselves. Both wrote in the eighteenth century, but their doctrines did not achieve their full effect until the nineteenth, in both cases mainly through the labours of their disciples. These studies are not intended as an examination of the entire *oeuvre* of either Vico or Herder: only of those among their theses which seemed to me the most arresting, important and suggestive. For this reason I have made no attempt to submit the more technical philosophical ideas of either thinker to critical examination, even though some among them raise issues of considerable importance. So – to take but three examples – Vico’s notion of *scienza*, which involves the conception of explanation *per causas*, seems to embody a view of causality which differs from those of Descartes or Hume or Kant or modern positivists, and leads him to a doctrine of motives and causes *par excellence* which is highly relevant to problems that are in hot dispute today. So, too, is the distinction he draws between *scienza* and *coscienza*, *verum* and *certum*, which, in its turn, is highly relevant to much Hegelian and post-Hegelian – materialist, Marxist, Freudian – discussion and controversy about historical and sociological methods. Again, Herder’s conceptions of teleological or cultural explanation made, or at least widened, conceptual and psychological paths not open to tough-minded and consistent materialists, positivists and mechanists – and this, too, leads to the widely varying positions of, among others, thinkers influenced by Marxism, by the doctrines of Wittgenstein, by writers on the sociology of knowledge or phenomenology. But a discussion of these philosophical developments, like that of anticipations of modern linguistic structuralism in Vico’s *New Science*, although both interesting and seminal, would take one too far from Vico’s and Herder’s own discussions of issues on which they propounded their most original and influential

theses – the nature and growth of human studies in general, and the nature of history and culture in particular. I have not attempted to trace the origins of these ideas, save in somewhat tentative fashion, nor to give an account of the historical or social circumstances in which they were conceived, nor their precise role in the *Weltanschauung* of the age, or even that of the thinkers themselves.

No one stressed the importance of comprehensive historical treatment more boldly or vehemently than Vico; no one argued more eloquently or convincingly than Herder that ideas and outlooks could be understood adequately only in genetic and historical terms, as expressions of the particular stage in the continuing development of the society in which they originated. A good deal of light has been shed on the intellectual and ideological sources of these ideas by scholars far more erudite than I can ever hope to be: Benedetto Croce, Antonio Corsano, Max H. Fisch, Nicola Badaloni, Paolo Rossi, A. Gerbi and, above all, Fausto Nicolini have done much of this for Vico; Rudolf Haym and, more recently, H. B. Nisbet, G. A. Wells, Max Rouché, V. M. Zhirmunsky and Robert Clark (to choose the most important) have provided an indispensable framework for Herder's teaching. I have profited greatly by their labours even where I disagreed with some of their assessments of the ideas themselves. Ideas are not born in a vacuum, nor by a process of parthenogenesis: knowledge of social history, of the interplay and impact of social forces at work in particular times and places, and of the problems which these generate is needed for assessing the full significance and purpose of all but the strictly technical disciplines and, some now tell us, even for the correct interpretation of the concepts of the exact sciences. Nor do I wish to deny the importance of considering why it is in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and still more in East Prussia, usually described as cultural backwaters in an age of intense intellectual and scientific activity, that original ideas of major importance were generated.

This is a historical problem for the solution of which knowledge of social, ideological and intellectual conditions is clearly indispensable, and which, so far as I know, has not been adequately examined. But it is not directly relevant to the purpose of these essays.

But even though such historical treatment is required for full understanding, it cannot be a necessary condition for grasping the central core of every historically influential doctrine or concept. The Neoplatonists in the later Roman Empire or during the Renaissance may not have interpreted Plato's doctrines as faithfully as more erudite and scrupulous commentators of a later period, who paid due attention to the relevant social and historical context of his thought, but if Plato's main doctrines had not transcended their own time and place, they would scarcely have had expended on them – or, indeed, deserved – the labours of gifted scholars and interpreters; nor would the imagination of distant posterity – of Plotinus or Pico della Mirandola or Marsilio Ficino or Michelangelo or Shaftesbury – have been set on fire by them; nor would they have had enough life in them to provoke major controversies in our own time. Accurate knowledge of the social, political and economic situation in England in the second half of the seventeenth century is certainly required for a full understanding of a particular passage in Locke's *Second Treatise* or of a letter to Stillingfleet. Yet what Voltaire (who did not go into such details), or the Founding Fathers of the American Republic, supposed him to mean nevertheless derives from his writings, and not solely, or even mainly, from their own minds or problems. The importance of accurate historical knowledge to the understanding of the meaning, force and influence of ideas may be far greater than many unhistorical thinkers, particularly in English-speaking lands, have recognised, but it is not everything. If the ideas and the basic terminology of Aristotle or the Stoics or Pascal or Newton or Hume or Kant did not possess a capacity for independent life, for surviving translation, and,

indeed, transplantation, not without, at times, some change of meaning, into the language of very disparate cultures, long after their own worlds had passed away, they would by now, at best, have found an honourable resting-place beside the writings of the Aristotelians of Padua or Christian Wolff, major influences in their day, in some museum of historical antiquities. The importance of historical hermeneutics has been greatly underestimated by historically insensitive British thinkers in the past – with the result that the swing of the pendulum sometimes makes it appear an end in itself. These are mere truisms, which need stating only because the notion of the possibility of a valid examination of the ideas of earlier ages, unless it is steeped in a rich cultural, linguistic and historical context, has been increasingly called into question in our day. Even though the shades of Vico and Herder are invoked in support of this doctrine, the importance of past philosophers in the end resides in the fact that the issues which they raised are live issues still (or again), and, as in this case, have not perished with the vanished societies of Naples or Königsberg or Weimar, in which they were conceived.

What, then, it may be asked, are these time-defying notions? In the case of Vico, let me try to summarise those which appear to me the most arresting in the form of seven theses:

1. That the nature of man is not, as has long been supposed, static and unalterable or even unaltered; that it does not so much as contain even a central kernel or essence which remains identical through change; that men's own efforts to understand the world in which they find themselves and to adapt it to their needs, physical and spiritual, continuously transform their worlds and themselves.

2. That those who make or create something can understand it as mere observers of it cannot. Since men in some sense make their own history (though what this kind of making consists in is not made entirely clear), men understand it as they do

not understand the world of external nature, which, since it is not made, but only observed and interpreted, by them, is not intelligible to them as their own experience and activity can be. Only God, because he has made nature, can understand it fully, through and through.

3. That, therefore, men's knowledge of the external world which they can observe, describe, classify, reflect upon, and of which they can record the regularities in time and space, differs in principle from their knowledge of the world that they themselves create, and which obeys rules that they have themselves imposed on their own creations. Such, for example, is knowledge of mathematics – something that men have themselves invented – of which they therefore have an 'inside' view; or of language, which men, and not the forces of nature, have shaped; and, therefore, of all human activities, inasmuch as it is men who are makers, actors and observers in one. History, since it is concerned with human action, which is the story of effort, struggle, purposes, motives, hopes, fears, attitudes, can therefore be known in this superior – 'inside' – fashion, for which our knowledge of the external world cannot possibly be the paradigm – a matter about which the Cartesians, for whom natural knowledge is the model, must therefore be in error. This is the ground of the sharp division drawn by Vico between the natural sciences and the humanities, between self-understanding on the one hand, and the observation of the external world on the other, as well as between their respective goals, methods, and kinds and degrees of knowability. This dualism has continued to be the subject of hot dispute ever since.

4. That there is a pervasive pattern which characterises all the activities of any given society: a common style reflected in the thought, the arts, the social institutions, the language, the ways of life and action of an entire society. This idea is tantamount to the concept of a culture; not necessarily of one culture, but of many; with the corollary that true understanding of human

history cannot be achieved without the recognition of a succession of the phases of the culture of a given society or people. This further entails that this succession is intelligible, and not merely causal, since the relationship of one phase of a culture or historical development to another is not that of mechanical cause and effect, but, being due to the purposive activity of men, designed to satisfy needs, desires, ambitions (the very realisation of which generates new needs and purposes), is intelligible to those who possess a sufficient degree of self-awareness, and occurs in an order which is neither fortuitous nor mechanically determined, but flows from elements in, and forms of, life, explicable solely in terms of human goal-directed activity. This social process and its order are intelligible to other men, members of later societies, since they are engaged in a similar enterprise which arms them with the means of interpreting the lives of their predecessors at a similar or different stage of spiritual and material development. The very notion of anachronism entails the possibility of this kind of historical understanding and ordering, since it requires a capacity for discriminating between what belongs and what cannot belong to a given stage of a civilisation and way of life; and this, in its turn, depends on an ability to enter imaginatively into the outlook and beliefs, explicit and implicit, of such societies – an enquiry that makes no sense if applied to the non-human world. For Vico the individual character of every society, culture, epoch is constituted by factors and elements which it may have in common with other periods and civilisations, but each particular pattern of which is distinguishable from all others; and, as a corollary of this, the concept of anachronism denotes lack of awareness of an intelligible, necessary order of succession which such civilisations obey. I doubt if anyone before Vico had a clear notion of culture or historical change in this sense.

5. That the creations of man – laws, institutions, religions, rituals, works of art, language, song, rules of conduct and the like – are not artificial products created to please, or to exalt, or

teach wisdom, nor weapons deliberately invented to manipulate or dominate men, or promote social stability or security, but are natural forms of self-expression, of communication with other human beings or with God. The myths and fables, the ceremonies and monuments of early man, according to the view prevalent in Vico's day, were absurd fantasies of helpless primitives, or deliberate inventions designed to delude the masses and secure their obedience to cunning and unscrupulous masters. This he regarded as a fundamental fallacy. Like the anthropomorphic metaphors of early speech, myths and fables and ritual are for Vico so many natural ways of conveying a coherent view of the world as it was seen and interpreted by primitive men. From which it follows that the way to understand such men and their worlds is by trying to enter their minds, by finding out what they are at, by learning the rules and significance of their methods of expression – their myths, their songs, their dances, the form and idioms of their language, their marriage and funeral rites. To understand their history, one needs to understand what they lived by, which can be discovered only by those who have the key to what their language, art, ritual mean – a key which Vico's *New Science* was intended to provide.

6. From which it follows (in effect a new type of aesthetics) that works of art must be understood, interpreted, evaluated, not in terms of timeless principles and standards valid for all men everywhere, but by a correct grasp of the purpose and therefore the peculiar use of symbols, especially of language, which belong uniquely to their own time and place, their own stage of social growth; that this alone can unravel the mysteries of cultures entirely different from one's own and hitherto dismissed either as barbarous confusions or as being too remote and exotic to deserve serious attention. This marks the beginning of comparative cultural history, indeed of a cluster of new historical disciplines: comparative anthropology and sociology, comparative law, linguistics, ethnology, religion, literature, the history of art, of

ideas, of institutions, of civilisations – indeed, the entire field of knowledge of what came to be called the social sciences in the widest sense, conceived in historical, that is, genetic, terms.

7. That, therefore, in addition to the traditional categories of knowledge – a priori/deductive, a posteriori/empirical, that provided by sense perception and that vouchsafed by revelation – there must now be added a new variety, the reconstructive imagination. This type of knowledge is yielded by ‘entering’ into the mental life of other cultures, into a variety of outlooks and ways of life which only the activity of *fantasia* – imagination – makes possible. *Fantasia* is for Vico a way of conceiving the process of social change and growth by correlating it with, indeed, viewing it as conveyed by, the parallel change or development of the symbolism by which men seek to express it; since the symbolic structures are themselves part and parcel of the reality which they symbolise, and alter with it. This method of discovery, which begins with understanding the means of expression, and seeks to reach the vision of reality which they presuppose and articulate, is a kind of transcendental deduction (in the Kantian sense) of historical truth. It is a method of arriving not, as hitherto, at an unchanging reality via its changing appearances, but at a changing reality – men’s history – through its systematically changing modes of expression.

Every one of these notions is a major advance in thought, any one of which by itself is sufficient to make the fortune of a philosopher. Vico’s work lay unheeded, save among scholars in his native city, until that most indefatigable of transmitters of ideas, Victor Cousin, brought it to the attention of Jules Michelet. The effect on the great French historian was immediate and transforming, and it was he who first spread Vico’s fame throughout the length and breadth of Europe.

Even though Michelet, at the end of his life, claimed that Vico was his only master, like every strongly original thinker he took

from the *New Science* only that which fitted in with his own, already formed, conception of history. He derived from Vico a vision of men as moulders of their own destinies, engaged in a Promethean struggle to achieve their own moral and social freedom, wresting from nature the means to serve their own human goals, and, in the course of this, creating and destroying institutions in the perpetual struggle to overcome obstacles, social and individual, to the full realisation of the moral energies and creative genius of entire peoples and societies. What does not fit into Michelet's ardent populist vision, for example the notion of a divine providence which, unknown to them, shapes the ends of individuals and societies – Vico's version of the Invisible Hand, or the Cunning of Reason – Michelet, in effect, half translates into secular terms and half ignores, as he ignores Vico's Platonic moments, his theory of historical cycles, his anti-democratic bias, his admiration for devout, authoritarian, semi-primitive societies, which is the very antithesis of Michelet's passionate faith in popular liberty.

This is an instance of a recurring phenomenon – that the importance and influence of ideas do not invariably depend on the validity or value of the systems in which they occur. That Plato or Spinoza or Leibniz or Kant were thinkers of genius has seldom been denied even by those who reject the central tenets of their metaphysical systems, or look on them as deleterious; this is so because they recognise that these philosophers advanced ideas the depth and power of which have permanently altered the history of thought, or (which comes to the same) that they raised issues which have exercised the minds of thinkers ever since; and this remains true even when some of the most ambitious and celebrated of the systems of thought which initially gave rise to these issues have long lost whatever life they may have had and are looked upon as being, at best, of purely historical interest. So it is with the two thinkers discussed in this book. Vico certainly supposed himself to have discovered a new science: that is,

general principles capable of yielding rules the correct application of which could, at least in principle, explain the order of the phases in the recurrent cycles of human history as completely as the triumphant natural sciences of his day could account for the regularities of the positions and movement of physical matter. I am not here concerned with weighing the justice of this claim against the claims of rival systems made by earlier and later thinkers. All I have attempted to do is to cast light on some of the building-blocks in this vast, sprawling, at times fantastic, baroque edifice: stones that are valuable on their own account, capable of being used in the construction of firmer, if more modest, structures. This holds of such novel notions as, for example (to recall them once again), Vico's distinction between the realm of nature, which obeys (knowable but not intelligible) laws, and the man-made, which is subject to (intelligible) rules; his theory of the function of myth and symbolism and above all of language; his conception of a central style which characterises and expresses (he does not say that it determines or renders coherent) the varied activities of societies or entire epochs, which in its turn suggests the notion of a variety of human cultures; together with the radical implications for aesthetics, anthropology, and, of course, the entire range of the historical sciences, of such an approach to human activity.

So also with Herder. He too tried to embrace the entire province of knowledge of his time: science and art, metaphysics and theory, epistemology and ethics, social life, history, anthropology, psychology, all that men were most deeply concerned with in the past and the present and (with far greater emphasis than Vico) the future. Like the English thinkers by whom he was deeply influenced, like Young and Percy and the Wartons and Sterne (and Lavater in Zurich), he was a divine and a man of letters, and, in an age of increasing specialisation, aimed at universality. He was a poet, a philosopher, a literary scholar and historian, an amateur philologist, an aesthetic theorist and critic, an eager student of

the biological and physical sciences of his day: he wished to bring all the sciences of man and of his environment, his origins, his history into a single integrated whole. He regarded the frontiers between the human sciences as pedantic and artificial devices, irksome hindrances to self-understanding by human beings in all their illimitable variety and spiritual power, which the tidy categories of philosophers vainly sought to contain. In the course of this vast undertaking, for which he had neither the capacity nor the knowledge, he originated and gave life and substance to ideas some of which have entered permanently into the texture of European thought and feeling.

Among the concepts which Herder originated or infused with a new life are at least three central ideas, which have grown in strength and influence since they were launched: the idea that men, if they are to exercise their faculties fully, and so develop into all that they can be, need to belong to identifiable communal groups, each with its own outlook, style, traditions, historical memories and language; the idea that the spiritual activity of men – expressed in art and literature, religion and philosophy, laws and sciences, play and work – consists not in the creation of objects, of commodities or artefacts, the value of which resides in themselves, and is independent of their creators and their characters and their purposes, but in forms of communication with other men. The creative activity of men is to be conceived not as the production of objects for use or pleasure or instruction, additions to or improvements on the world of external nature, but as voices speaking, as expressions of individual visions of life, to be understood not by rational analysis, that is, dissection into constituent elements, nor by exhaustive classification under concepts, subsumption under general principles or laws, incorporation in logically coherent systems or the use of other technical devices, but only by *Einfühlen* – empathy – the gifts not of a judge, a compiler or an anatomist, but of an artist endowed with historical insight and imagination. ‘Every court, every school,

every profession, every closed corporation, every sect,' wrote Herder's mentor, Johann Georg Hamann, 'each has its own vocabulary', which can be grasped only with the passion of 'a friend, an intimate, a lover';¹ abstract formulae, general theories, scientific laws are keys that open no individual door. Only a combination of historical scholarship with a responsive, imaginative sensibility can find a path into the inner life, the vision of the world, the aspirations, values, ways of life of individuals or groups or entire civilisations. Finally, it was Herder who set in motion the idea that since each of these civilisations has its own outlook and way of thinking and feeling and acting, creates its own collective ideals in virtue of which it is a civilisation, it can be truly understood and judged only in terms of its own scale of values, its own rules of thought and action, and not of those of some other culture: least of all in terms of some universal, impersonal, absolute scale, such as the French *philosophes* seemed to think that they had at their disposal when they so arrogantly and blindly gave marks to all societies, past and present, praised or condemned this or that individual or civilisation or epoch, set some up as universal models and rejected others as barbarous or vicious or absurd. To judge, still more to mock at, the past according to one's own – or some other alien – lights must lead to grave distortion. The ancient Hebrews must not be judged by the standards of classical Greece, still less by those of Voltaire's Paris or of his imaginary Chinese mandarins; nor should Norsemen or Indians or Teutons be looked at through the spectacles of an Aristotle or a Boileau. He is as critical of Europocentrism as his enemy Voltaire. For him men are men, and have common traits at all times; but it is their differences that matter most, for it is the differences that make them what they are, make them themselves, it is in these that the individual genius of men and cultures is expressed.

¹ W ii 172.21, 171.15.

The denial, at any rate in Herder's earlier writings, of absolute and universal values carries the implication, which with time has grown increasingly disturbing, that the goals and values pursued by various human cultures may not only differ, but may, in addition, not all be compatible with one another; that variety, and perhaps conflict, are not accidental, still less eliminable, attributes of the human condition, but, on the contrary, may be intrinsic properties of men as such. If this is so, then the notion of a single, unchanging, objective code of universal precepts – the simple, harmonious, ideal way of life to which, whether they know it or not, all men aspire (the notion which underlies the central current of the Western tradition of thought) – may turn out to be incoherent; for there appear to be many visions, many ways of living and thinking and feeling, each with its own 'centre of gravity',¹ self-validating, uncombinable, still less capable of being integrated into a seamless whole. It is worth remarking that, apart from this revolutionary corollary, which undermined the ancient notion of the moral unity of the human race, or, at least, of that of its rational members – the notion that variety is either inescapable, or valuable in itself, or both at once, was itself novel. Herder may not be its only begetter, but the idea that variety is preferable to uniformity, and not simply a form of human failure to arrive at the one true answer, and consequently a form of error or imperfection – the rejection of the traditional belief in the necessary harmony of values in a rational universe, whether as the reality beneath the appearances, or as the ideal presupposed by both reason and faith – this radical departure is altogether modern. The ancient world and the Middle Ages knew nothing of it.

These ideas – that all explanation, all understanding, indeed, all living, depend on a relationship to a given social whole and its unique past, and that it is incapable of being fitted into some

¹ v 509.

repetitive, generalised pattern; the sharp contrast between qualitative as opposed to quantitative approaches; the notion that art is communication, a form of doing and being, not of making objects detachable from the maker; the notion that change and variety are intrinsic to human beings; that truth and goodness are not universal and immutable Platonic forms in a super-sensible, timeless, crystalline heaven, but many and changing; that the collision of equally compelling claims and goals may be unavoidable and incapable of rational resolution, so that some choices may be at once unavoidable and agonising – all these notions, which entered into many varieties of romanticism, relativism, nationalism, populism, and many brands of individualism, together with corresponding attacks upon the methods of the natural sciences and rational enquiry based on tested empirical evidence, have their fateful beginnings here. To ascribe some of these views to either of the thinkers treated in these pages would be false and unjust. Men are not responsible for the careers of their ideas: still less for the aberrations to which they lead.

Both Vico and Herder tended to overstate their central theses. Such exaggeration is neither unusual nor necessarily to be deplored. Those who have discovered (or think they have discovered) new and important truths are liable to see the world in their light, and it needs a singular degree of intellectual control to retain a due sense of proportion and not be swept too far along the newly opened paths. Many original thinkers exaggerate greatly. Plato and the Stoics, Descartes, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Russell, Freud (not to mention later masters) claimed too much. Nor is it likely that their ideas would have broken through the resistance of received opinion or been accorded the attention that they deserved, if they had not. The moderation of an Aristotle or a Locke is the exception rather than the rule.

Vico was not answering questions posed by earlier thinkers. His vision of men and their past involved him in conceiving,

in some excitement (to which he owns), new categories and concepts, and his struggle to adapt traditional terms to convey the basic structure of the new discipline to his contemporaries resulted in sudden leaps of thought and a convoluted and obscure terminology. Herder often wrote with a rhapsodic intensity not conducive to clear reflection or expression. The vehement zeal with which both Vico and Herder thought and spoke inevitably blinded them to the great cardinal merits of the methods of the thinkers against whom they inveighed. In a radical conflict of beliefs and methods on this scale, both sides were bound to attack too violently and to reject too much. It is plain to us now that insight, no matter how brilliant and intuitive, and attempts to reconstruct the main lines of entire cultures by sheer imaginative genius, based on scattered erudition, are not sufficient.

In the end it is only scrupulous examination of the evidence of the past, and the systematic self-critical piecing together of whatever can be empirically established, that can confirm one hypothesis and weaken or rule out others as implausible or absurd. History needs whatever it can obtain from any source or method of empirical knowledge. As antiquarian research, archaeology, epigraphy, palaeography, philology have altered historical writing in previous centuries, so quantitative methods, the accumulation and use of statistical information to support economic, sociological, psychological, anthropological generalisations, have added to, and transformed, our knowledge of the human past, and are doing so to an increasing extent. The use of chemical and biological techniques has added materially to the knowledge of the origins of men and the dating and identification of the monuments on which our knowledge is founded. Without reliable empirical evidence, the most richly imaginative efforts to recover the past must remain guesswork and breed fictions and romances. Nor is there any assignable limit to the influence upon historical studies of disciplines yet unborn. Nevertheless, without such inspired insights, the accumulated data remain dead:

Baconian generalisations are not enough. The revolt against, on the one hand, the labours of antiquaries and compilers (Voltaire was among the first to cover them with ridicule), and the ideological dogmas of the Enlightenment on the other, transformed both literature and history.

Vico, even after Michelet, remained an esoteric interest. But the influence of Herder's writings, acknowledged and unacknowledged, direct or indirect, was wide and permanent. After him the feeling grew that human history was not a linear progression, but a succession of distinct and heterogeneous civilisations, some of which influenced each other, but which could, nevertheless, be seen to possess an inner unity, to be individual social wholes, intelligible in their own right and not primarily as so many steps to some other, more perfect, way of life. Such cultures could not be reconstructed fragment by fragment in accordance with mechanical rules supplied by a generalising science: their constituent elements could be grasped adequately only in relation to each other – this indeed was what was meant by speaking of a civilisation, a way of living and an expression of a society characterised by an identifiable pattern, a central style which informed, if not all, yet a great many of its activities, and so revealed, even in its internal tensions, its differences and conflicts, a certain degree of unity of feeling and purpose. This style or character was not something that could be abstracted from its concrete expressions or used as a reliable method of infallibly reconstructing missing facts and filling gaps in our empirical knowledge; it was not governed by discoverable laws, nor could it yield a formula defining some metaphysical essence from which the attributes or history of men were logically deducible. It was an intelligible, empirically recognisable, pattern, a network of relationships between human beings, a way of responding to their environment and one another, a form – some said a structure – of thought, feeling and action. This could be grasped only by the use of the imagination, by a capacity to conceive the life

of an entire society, to ‘feel oneself into’¹ its mode of thought, speech, feeling; to visualise the gestures, to hear the voices, to trace the changing moods and attitudes and in this way to follow the fortunes of its members.

Both these thinkers perceived – Herder more vividly than Vico – that the task of integrating disparate data and interpretations of events, movements, situations, of synthesising such heterogeneous material into a coherent picture, demands gifts very different from those required for rational methods of investigation or formulation and verification of specific hypotheses: above all, the gift of breathing life into the dead bones in the burial grounds of the past, of a creative imagination. In the absence of sufficient empirical evidence, such accounts of total social experience may remain no more than historical romances; but unless one is able in the first place to imagine such worlds in concrete detail, there will be little enough that is worth verifying: without the initial intuitive vision of a world about which one wishes to learn, the data remain lifeless, the individuals mere names, at most stylised figures in a procession, a pageant of operatic characters clothed in historical garments, or at best idealised personages in a classical drama. The rational methods of reconstruction of the past, whether human or non-human – zoological, palaeontological, geological – lead to conclusions that are precise or vague, valid or invalid, accurate or inaccurate, correct or incorrect, and are so certified by the application of methods accepted by reputable experts in the relevant field. But such attributes as ‘profound’ and ‘shallow’, ‘plausible’ and ‘implausible’, ‘living’ and ‘lifeless’, ‘authentic’ and ‘unreal’, ‘rounded’ and ‘flat’ and the like are not often ascribed to the achievements of logic or epistemology or scientific method but are more often used to characterise the arts and works of scholarship, which require a capacity for insight, responsiveness, understanding of what men are and can be, of

¹ V 503.

their inner lives, perception of the meaning and implications, and not only of the appearances, of their observable gestures. These are terms used to describe works of humane learning – histories, biographies, works of criticism and interpretation, some branches of philosophy, and, indeed, the more precise labours of the reconstruction of the monuments of the past – social, religious, literary – works of art, buildings, cities. It was the psychological gifts required for imaginative reconstruction of forms of life – ideally to read the symbols with which societies and civilisations express themselves as a graphologist reads handwriting – if not as they were, at least, as they could have been, as well as the intellectual capacity for weighing the empirical evidence for and against the authenticity of such accounts, that were demanded by the new kind of history, and so sharply divided its founders – Boeckh and Niebuhr, Augustin Thierry and Guizot, Ranke and, above all, Burckhardt and after him Dilthey – from even the best writers of the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. ‘Even a half-false historical perspective is worth much more than none at all’, wrote Burckhardt in a letter in 1859.¹ To have opened doors to this great enlargement of the human spirit is the achievement of the two thinkers with whom these essays are concerned.

¹ Letter of 20 June 1859 to Wilhelm Vischer the younger.

The Philosophical Ideas of Giambattista Vico

Singulière destinée que celle de cet homme! Lui qui fut
si intuitif, il sort du tombeau lorsqu'il n'a plus rien à
enseigner.

Pierre-Simon Ballanche¹

Historici utiles, non qui facta crassius et genericas
caussas narrant, sed qui ultimas factorum circumstantias
persequuntur, et caussarum peculiare reserant.

Giambattista Vico²

I

VICO'S LIFE AND FATE provide perhaps the best of all known examples of what is too often dismissed as a romantic fiction – the story of a man of original genius, born before his time, forced to struggle in poverty and illness, misunderstood and largely neglected in his lifetime and (save among a handful of Neapolitan jurists) all but totally forgotten after his death. Finally, when after many years he is at last exhumed and acclaimed by an astonished nation as one of its greatest thinkers, it is only to be

¹ 'Strange destiny of this man! He who was so intuitive rises from his tomb when he has nothing more to teach.' *Essais de palingénésie sociale: Oeuvres de M. Ballanche* (Paris and Geneva, 1830) iii 338.

² 'The useful historians are not those who give general descriptions of facts and explain them by reference to general conditions, but those who go into the greatest detail and reveal the particular cause of each event.' DA 145/60.

widely misrepresented and misinterpreted, and even today to be accorded less than his due, because the *anagnorisis* has come too late, and during the century that followed his death ideas similar to his were better expressed by others, while he is best remembered for the least original and valuable of his doctrines. It is true that Vico's style tends to be baroque, undisciplined and obscure; and the eighteenth century, which came close to taking the view that not to say things clearly is not to say them at all, buried him in a grave from which not even his devoted Italian commentators have fully succeeded in raising him. Yet his works are of an arresting novelty, a half-abandoned quarry of fascinating, if ill-developed, ideas unique even in his own intellectually fertile age.

Vico's claim to originality will stand scrutiny from any point of vantage. His theories of the nature and development of the human mind, of culture, society and human history, are audacious and profound. He developed a novel theory of knowledge which in the hands of others played a decisive role. He distinguished for the first time a central type of human knowledge which had been misunderstood or neglected by previous thinkers. He was a bold innovator in the realms of natural law and jurisprudence, aesthetics and the philosophy of mathematics. Indeed his conception of mathematical reasoning was so revolutionary that full justice could scarcely have been done to it until the transformation effected by the logicians of the twentieth century, and it has not been fully recognised for what it is even now. More than this, Vico virtually invented a new field of social knowledge, which embraces social anthropology, the comparative and historical studies of philology, linguistics, ethnology, jurisprudence, literature, mythology, in effect the history of civilisation in the broadest sense. Finally, he put forward a cyclical view of human history, which, although it is significantly different from those of Plato, Aristotle, Polybius and their followers in the Italian Renaissance, and has had some influence on

later thinkers, is probably the best-known and the least valuable among his achievements.

One can readily understand that in the case of a thinker so rich and so confused, and above all so genuinely seminal – the forerunner of so many of the boldest ideas of later, more celebrated, thinkers – there is a permanent temptation to read too much into him, especially to sense intimations, perceive embryonic forms and prefigured contours of notions dear to the interpreter himself. Michelet, Dilthey, Croce, Collingwood (and less certainly Herder and Hegel) are among his progeny, and some among them, notably Michelet and Croce, consciously or unconsciously tried to repay their debt by attributing too many of their own most characteristic ideas and attitudes, sometimes at the cost of patent anachronism, to Vico's writings. To attribute one's own opinions to an earlier thinker is doubtless a sincere form of admiration. It is one of the attributes of intellectual depth that very different minds fancy that they find their own reflection in it. But this characteristic is purchased at a price, and has rendered Vico a disservice. Neither the romantic humanist of Michelet's fervid imagination, nor the more plausibly drawn quasi-Hegelian metaphysician celebrated by Croce (still less Gentile's bold variation of this), nor Enzo Paci's proto-existentialist, nor Nicola Badaloni's naturalistic forerunner of Feuerbach, reveal enough of Vico's own original shape and colour. The devoted labours of the most scrupulous, scholarly and dedicated of the editors and glossators of Vico, Fausto Nicolini, provide a marvellous monument of lucid learning, but no more.¹ There is, as in the case of all authentic thinkers, no substitute for reading the

¹ Neither the later Italian scholars, with Antonio Corsano and Paolo Rossi at their head, nor the admirable German critics Erich Auerbach and Karl Löwith, nor the English-speaking students of Vico, among whom Max Harold Fisch is the most distinguished, widely as their interpretations differ, can, for the most part, be charged with a tendency to transform Vico into a vehicle for their own ideas.

original. This is no easy labour, but – here one can speak only from personal experience – the reward is great. Few intellectual pleasures are comparable to the discovery of a thinker of the first water.

Giovanni Battista Vico was born in 1668, the son of a bookseller in Naples. He died there in 1744. Apart from the few years which he spent in nearby Vatolla in Cilento, as a tutor to the sons of Domenico Rocca, marchese di Vatolla, he never left Naples. All his life he had hoped to be appointed to the principal chair of jurisprudence in his native city, but succeeded only in holding various lower posts in the related field of ‘rhetoric’, ending with an inferior professorship which he held from 1699 until 1741. It provided him with a modest salary, and obliged him to deliver a number of inaugural lectures, some of which contain his most original ideas. He eked out his low income by accepting commissions from the rich and the grand to write Latin inscriptions, official eulogies and laudatory biographies of important persons. The best-known of these are his life of Antonio Caraffa, a Neapolitan *condottiere* in the service of the Emperor, and an account of the unsuccessful Macchia conspiracy in Naples. Caraffa’s campaigns involved Vico in the study of inter-State relations, and it is probably this that caused him to read Grotius and other philosophical jurists. This had a decisive effect on his own ideas. The story of the Macchia was concerned with an attempt made at the turn of the century to replace Spanish by Austrian rule in Naples. The plot was uncovered and in 1701 the ringleaders were executed by the Spaniards. In 1702 Vico published an account of the conspiracy denouncing the participants as criminals and traitors. Five years later the Austrians acquired Naples and held it for the next twenty-seven years. In 1708 Vico issued a memorial volume which made no reference to the earlier work and celebrated the two chief conspirators as patriots and martyrs. In 1734 Naples was reoccupied by Spain. The new ruler, Charles de Bourbon, was duly offered humble congratulations by Vico at the head of a