

Wisdom and Eloquence in the Tacit Dimension: Vico and Polanyi on Knowing and Making

Craig E. Mattson

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This comparative study searches out intersections in the thought of Giambattista Vico and Michael Polanyi by situating their thought in relation to the history of ideas generally and to the rhetorical tradition specifically. The overarching concern of the essay is the relation between knowing and making truth—or, in rhetorical terms, between wisdom and eloquence.

I

Vico has been the victim of a good many bad comparative essays. He “has been hailed and promoted as the discoverer of almost every major field of knowledge in the humanities and in the social sciences” (Mali 1-2). Admittedly, the prevalence of what Mali calls the “Vichian industry” can be explained by the fact that the Italian humanist talked about a lot of things that happen to concern us today. For example, Vichian ideas appear to align with postmodern critique, because, as Giorgio Tagliacozzo observes, Vico attacked Cartesianism, meshed rhetoric and philosophy, and sought interdisciplinarity (Danesi 182-183). Furthermore, as Robert Miner observes, Vico’s *verum-factum* insistence that what is true is convertible to what is made appears to align with the postmodern penchant for constructivism.¹ But to argue that Vico saw through a glass darkly what postmoderns now see clearly with a wry squint is not only patronizing—it’s modernist. “The claim that generations transition progressively from one distinctive era to the next, the periodization of history, is a peculiarly modern device,” writes Conyers (293).

This essay’s comparison of Vico with Michael Polanyi does not argue a genetic relation between the two thinkers. It is true that, like Vico, Polanyi was a friend of the humanities and a foe of the more reductive aspects of the Enlightenment. It is also true that Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowing works out a variation on the *verum-factum* principle. But to demonstrate an eidetic relation between Polanyi and Vico would not be true to the intellectual habits of either man. In the following essay, I first put Polanyi and Vico into conversation by locating, or dislocating, their key concerns in the history of ideas. Then I focus on one strand of the humanities, the rhetorical tradition, in order to suggest three ways Polanyi’s notions of the relation between eloquence and wisdom redact Vico’s notions of the same themes.

II

In order to demonstrate Vico’s affinity with postmodern thought, I could show how his ideas respond to what Peter Berger calls “five dilemmas that modernity has imposed on human life”: abstraction, futurity, individuation, secularization, and liberation (71).² In anticipation of the first four modern dilemmas, Vichian ideas coordinate with much of postmodern critique. But no dilemma is as important for this essay as the last one, liberation, which Berger describes as a condition in which “large areas of human life, previously considered to be dominated by fate, now come to be perceived as occasions for choice—by the individual, or by collectivities, or by both” (*Modern* 76). Not only is the importance of this concept of liberation implicit in Vico’s

verum-factum principle (which privileges human creativity and, therefore, human choice), but the concept also appears explicitly in *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, where Vico writes, “Since in our time, the only target of our intellectual endeavors is truth, we devote all our efforts to the investigation of physical phenomena, because their nature seems unambiguous; but we fail to inquire into human nature which, because of the freedom of man’s will, is difficult to determine” (33). A careful read-through of that sentence will show why Vico can be hard to position neatly on a modern/postmodern continuum. At first glance, the sentence looks like a postmodern salvo against scientism: Vico is questioning the preoccupation with physical phenomena as a master vocabulary for intellectual inquiry. But the fact that he emphasizes the importance of human will (in ways that recall Berger’s description of liberation) begins to make Vico look modernist.

Indeed, the modernist characteristics in Vico’s thought show up elsewhere as well. Take, for example, his *Study Methods*, in which he becomes almost rhapsodic about the expansion of modernity in science, exploration, and politics (9-10). Of scientists, he writes, “Do not consider them as groping practitioners of physics: they are to be viewed, instead, as the grand architects of this limitless fabric of the world: able to give a detailed accounting of the ensemble of principles according to which God has built this admirable structure of the cosmos” (10). Such a celebration of physicists does not sit well with some postmodern preachments that science is only another kind of preachment (Schiappa, et al. 114, 116-117; Rorty, *Social* 176; Grenz 46-49). And what about Vico’s frank adherence to a metanarrative of providence, in which all the religious instincts of humankind are led to their fulfillment in the revealed religion of Christianity? Or his preferring the geometer over the poet in the development of his *New Science* (Miner 113)? Or what do we make of his praise for “the sage who, through all the obliquities and uncertainties of human actions and events, keeps his eye steadily focused on eternal truth...” (*Study* 35)? Providence? Eternal truth? How can these things be reconciled with a postmodern “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv)?

As it turns out, Vico, like Polanyi, is hard to peg as either modern or postmodern. On the one hand, Vichian thought does not hold that the truth is merely out there, wholly independent of human choice or creativity. On the other, his ideas do not comport well with postmodern notions that the truth is wholly a human construct (Luft). Like Polanyi, he seems to believe in knowledge that is at one and the same time subjective and objective, personal and impersonal. Perhaps the blurring of the lines between the modern and the postmodern in Vichian and Polanyian thought is partially explained by noting that they both recognized that the critical question in every era of history is how to negotiate the relation between the dependence and the independence, the createdness and the creativity, of humans.

Furthermore, if it is true, as Conyers has argued (293-295), that a privileging of human will is characteristic of both modern and postmodern sensibilities, then perhaps the most interesting opposition in Vico is not between modernity and postmodernity, but between both and antiquity. Over half a century ago, Lewis wrote, “For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men” (88). Vico’s belief in a fixed natural law in cyclical history suggests his agreement with the ancients, especially in his emphasis on the constancies of the world. But although the Vichian world resisted ceaseless redescription, neither was it absolutely fixed. Here Vico parts ways with both the Greeks and the Cartesians, whose horizons align on the fixity of nature.³ Unlike many of the ancients and the moderns, Vico made place both for the contingency and for the givenness of truth. As Miner summarizes the Vichian *verum-factum* principle, “Making is the source of our acquaintance with eternal truths that are not of our making” (108).

I have traced Vico's thought from one epoch to another—from postmodern to modern to ancient. This tracing follows the long round of history, what Vico calls in his *scienza nouva* a “rational civil theology of providence” (*New* 152 390).⁴ The circle of history began as the race broke the surface of its own brutishness and filled its lungs with the rare air of religiosity and civilization, little knowing that its descendents would submerge again into barbarism. The troglodyte ascended to the Greek only to descend to the medieval and rise again in the Renaissance man. This is “the *ideal eternal history* through which the history of all nations must in time pass” (*New* 154 393).

No wonder, then, considering this cyclical view of history, it is difficult to position Vico as more sympathetic with the ancients or with the (post)moderns.⁵ On the one hand, his *scienza nouva* corrects for the decidedly modern habit of underestimating the givens of human experience, those aspects of the human condition that are responsive to a calling from outside ourselves. But at the same time, although honoring the role of divine providence in history, Vico manages to honor human agency as well.⁶

Polanyian readers will recognize in Vico two important commonalities between *scienza nouva* and the tacit dimension. First, an attempt to position Vico in the history of ideas reveals what Nancy S. Struever calls “dislocative” tendencies in Vichian thought (qtd. in Luft ix)—tendencies that recall the similarly synchronic intellectual habits of Polanyi, who in the middle of the twentieth century was attempting a rescue of modernity by calling for a postmodern epistemology attentive to premodern commitments.⁷ Second, Vico is like Polanyi in his preoccupation with the convertibility of knowing and making, or the “fusion of the personal and the objective” (*PK* viii).

Having attempted to put Vico's notions into conversation with the history of ideas, this essay now focuses on one strand of the humanities, the rhetorical tradition. The convertibility of knowing and making, which has preoccupied the first sections of this essay, emerges in the following section in terms of the ancient rhetorical inquiry into the relation of wisdom and eloquence.

III.

Wisdom has been held by some rhetoricians (generally associated with Plato) as wholly distinct from eloquence. Other thinkers (roughly identified with Aristotle or Cicero) insist that wisdom may be discovered by means of eloquence. The former position tends to emphasize that wisdom is something that humans contemplate without any help by eloquence; the latter that wisdom is something that humans at least partially create by means of eloquence.

To understand Vico on the subject of wisdom and eloquence, we must first turn to a thinker whose influence is felt throughout Vichian rhetorical theory: Cicero. In *De Oratore*, Cicero defines eloquence as “one of the supreme virtues...which, after encompassing a knowledge of facts, gives verbal expression to the thoughts and purposes of the mind in such a manner as to have the power of driving the hearers forward in any direction in which it has applied its weight” (III.xiv.55). So, put simply, eloquence is the means of persuasively communicating a message. But in the Ciceronian tradition, the means is so closely identified with the message, that eloquence must always be linked with wisdom: “the stronger this faculty [of eloquence] is,” writes Cicero, “the more necessary it is for it to be combined with integrity and supreme wisdom” (III.xiv.55). As Vico writes of himself in his third-person autobiography: “He never discussed matters pertaining to eloquence apart from wisdom but would say that eloquence is nothing but wisdom speaking” (199). For the same reason, in his first

oration, he refers to Cicero as “the most eloquent of the wise men, or the wisest of the eloquent men” (*Humanistic* 38). And in the sixth oration, he refers to eloquence as one of the duties of wisdom in order “to tame the impetuosity of the fools” (130). Always and again, the acquisition of wisdom should be followed by the eloquent conveyance of this wisdom to one’s community (132).

But what is wisdom? In a word, it “consists in the knowledge of things divine and prudent judgment in human affairs and speech that is true and proper” (132). Knowledge, judgment, and eloquence—these are three integral aspects of wisdom, but they all find their beginning, for Vico, in knowledge of self. The first Vichian oration includes an adaptation of the Delphic summons: “Know thyself, therefore, O youth, so that you can attain wisdom, since you are born for wisdom” (40). As usual, Vico appropriates Cicero’s gloss on this phrase and tells the student audience that to know oneself is to know one’s spirit (39), for the rhetorical tradition has, until the twentieth century, tended to be rather distrustful of the body. Vico appears to associate purity with spirit, whereas the body is something that must be constantly reigned in. For example, when he explains that just as God fills the creation without being limited by it, so the human spirit fills the body, he adds tellingly, “Both are free of all materiality and, unmixed with any corporality, they act in their purity” (40-41).

To know oneself, furthermore, is to be transformed. Miner’s exposition of Vico’s *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* and *De mente heroica* makes clear that the Vichian quest for truth is dependent on understanding the workings of the human mind. This is a quest with radically transformative implications. In short, this self-focused epistemic project requires a radical self-denial. Call it the existential equivalent of the Uncertainty Principle: the self cannot be known without being changed.

So much for Vico on eloquence and wisdom. To describe the role of eloquence in the work of a chemist cum philosopher of science like Polanyi, on the other hand, might seem a stretch. But rhetorical concerns actually play a prominent role in his cultivation of a wise and “truer intellectual life” (*PK* 189), even when he seems to be eschewing traditional rhetoric altogether:

I do not assume that I can force my view on my opponents by argument.... Yet where the metaphysical believer cannot hope to convince, he may still strive to convert. Though powerless to argue with the nihilist he may yet succeed in conveying to him the intimation of a mental satisfaction which he is lacking; and this intimation may start in him a process of conversion.” (*SFS* 81).

Here, he admits that he does not construct his argument in the familiar point-proof, point-proof, point-proof-*win* format. But even so, his rhetorical impulse is firmly in place: “Every scientist feels the urge to convince his fellow scientists of the rightness of his own claims” (51). Even in so abstract an argument as a mathematical proof, discourse does far more than simply transfer data: such a communication *persuades*, because it is “guided by the specific purpose of establishing a particular implication and compelling its acceptance. It endorses this purpose as worthy of a great effort, and sets up standards of economy and beauty for the manner of its achievement” (*PK* 119). If the “achievement” Polanyi describes is anything akin to wisdom, then his emphasis on beauty’s role in persuasion suggests that Polanyian rhetoric must be eloquent to be wise.

But even if the role of eloquence be acknowledged in Polanyian thought, does he allow a place for wisdom? Polanyi is so much less homiletic than his Italian counterpart that it seems quixotic to look for so

morally charged a concept as wisdom in the tacit dimension.⁸ But the Delphic Oracle speaks through Polanyi as well as through Vico, especially when *The Study of Man* insists “that a conversion to a truer way of *being a man* will induce a better *understanding of man*” (82-83). Indeed, it is not just in knowing ourselves that we become wiser: the act of knowing, or “indwelling,” anything requires that we make what we are indwelling “an extension of ourselves through our subsidiary awareness of it” (*PK* 61). In this indwelling, we find ourselves transformed, because, as Polanyi insists, “every act of understanding somewhat rectifies our being” (*SM* 82).⁹

Having identified some convergences between Vichian and Polanyian understandings of the wisdom/eloquence relation, I should like to suggest three ways that Polanyi redacts Vico’s understanding of the relation between wisdom and eloquence. In short, Polanyi offers a more embodied, abductive, and aural view of rhetoric than does Vico.

IV

Polanyi’s understanding of the role of the body in human knowing is more adequate to the rhetorical tradition than is Vico’s distrust of the body. For Polanyi, the body is where knowledge begins, because the act of knowing always starts from a pouring of our bodily selves into the world (*PK* 58-59, 98). This notion that knowing must be embodied matters immensely, because wisdom, understood rhetorically, is as much about body as about mind, as much about subsidiaries as about focal points. To diminish the importance of what we are attending *from* in order to honor what we are attending *to* is a vain project, especially for the rhetorical tradition in which the means matter as much as the message, the style as much as the substance.

But Vico distrusts the body, considering it a site for folly (*Humanistic* 61-62). This distrust obtains not only for the individual, sensual fool, who is condemned in the Second Oration, but also for the broader human species in his description of primitive humans, “the children of the human race,” whom he scorns in the *New Science* (93 209). “With the aid of metaphysics, I have finally been able to descend into the confused minds of the first founders of the pagan nations, which were filled with vivid sensations and unbounded fantasies. Such people had only a dull and dim-witted capacity for applying their human reason” (4 6). Accordingly, “the earliest men, as the children of the human race, were unable to conceive rational categories of things . . .” (93 209). Early humans did less ratiocination about things than remembering similarities between things. In other words, Vico thought their fables were, as Robert Miner explains, essentially mimetic (113). By continual imitation of the world around them, they gradually developed a mythology (92-93 206, 209) that employed the “eyes of the body,”¹⁰ in contrast to the Greeks who used the “eyes of the mind” (152 391).¹¹

Polanyi not only trusts the body more than Vico, but may also have a greater respect for the primitive mind. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Polanyi trusts the modern mind less than Vico does. Primitive and modern epistemologies, Polanyi argues, are alike in what he calls their functional aspects (*TD* 10-13). To use his terms, both the primitives and the philosophers were attending *from* proximal details *to* distal realities. The difference between the two is semantic in that the primitive imagination “greatly exaggerates the interaction between subsidiaries and their focus”; whereas the modern imagination “*fails* to note the deep-set qualities of the from-to relations and seeks to reduce the human mind to a predictable system of responses” (*M* 137-138).

He cites as a corroborative example, Evans-Pritchard’s study of the Azande’s rejection of scientific explanations for their oracle. Vico would probably call these people superstitious, mythic, uncategorical.¹² But

Polanyi is able to be more generous all around, because he considers the functional relation between the implicit beliefs and the explicit belief system of the tribe to be strikingly like modern scientific reasoning. As Polanyi insists, modernist

objectivism, which tolerates no open declaration of faith, has forced modern beliefs to take on implicit forms, like those of the Azande. And no one will deny that those who have mastered the idioms in which these beliefs are entailed do also reason most ingeniously within these idioms, even while—again like Azande—they unhesitatingly ignore all that the idiom does not cover. (*PK* 288).

The tribal and scientific epistemologies both make sense of things by indwelling tacitly known subsidiaries. It is not so much the case that the Azande is imaginative and the scientist abstract, but rather that they both creatively fuse subsidiaries to form satisfying conceptions of the nature of things. The adequacy of their imaginative fusions differs because they understand the relationship between the *from* and the *to*, between the subsidiary and focal terms, differently.¹³ In terms of the rhetorical tradition, if the *from* corresponds to the means of eloquence (often enough, the body), and the *to* corresponds to the message of knowledge or wisdom (contained in the mind), then the primitive poet is sometimes too preoccupied with eloquence to achieve wisdom. But then, modern scientists have often made the opposite mistake by privileging their own equivalent of wisdom—the pursuit of absolute certainty—at the expense of eloquence.

Now, for the second Polanyian redaction of Vichian rhetorical theory: the abductive nature of eloquence. By *abductive*, I am referring simply to Polanyi's from-to relation, which always involves a tacking back and forth between the *from* and the *to*, as opposed to inductive logic which tends to proceed in linear fashion. Translated into rhetorical terms, a corollary of the from-to relation is that the rhetor-audience relation is abductively, or mutually, influential: what the rhetor believes to be plausible is continuously adapted by what the audience holds to be plausible. For Vico, on the other hand, rhetoric occurs in an inductive, linear, two-step process in which the rhetor first acquires wisdom and then decides how to convey it to the audience (*Humanistic* 14, 133). Even when Vico is at his most non-linear—i.e., when he contrasts the creeping, intellectualist habits of philosophers over against the speedy, intuitive habits of rhetoricians (*Study* 13)—he tends to treat eloquence as if its accommodation were entirely for the audience's sake. For Polanyi, however, eloquence and wisdom are joined for the orator's sake as much as for the audience's.

There is a sense, of course, in which Polanyi also divides rhetoric up into a two-step process: the rhetor discovers, then shares. He distinguishes “a heuristic act” performed by the discoverer of some truth from “the routine teaching and learning of its results” (*PK* 172). In another passage, he distinguishes between “[t]he impulse which in the original heuristic act was a violent irreversible self-conversion of the investigator” and “an almost equally tempestuous process of converting others” (172). But perhaps it would be more accurate to say that these two aspects of eloquence—discovery and conveying—are not so much steps that a rhetor follows to reach an auditor as sites for action and inquiry for the rhetor and the auditor alike.¹⁴ Because the acts of discovering and conveying the truth are convertible, they must be abductively pursued—i.e., the rhetor comes not with a pre-formed, but with a still-forming message. He or she is no less impassioned than Vico's rhetor, but the continuance of the passion is dependent on the responsiveness of the audience.

Whereas for Vico, the second step almost seems optional—the rhetor knows what is true, whether or not anyone else ever agrees—for Polanyi, the rhetor must be heard by the audience—and what is more, must

hear from the audience—in order for the truthfulness of the message to maintain its plausibility. “[W]e suffer when a vision of reality to which we have committed ourselves is contemptuously ignored by others. For a general unbelief imperils our own convictions by evoking an echo in us. Our vision must conquer or die” (*PK* 150). The ecstasy of new knowledge is so fragile that the enjoyment of truth can only be strengthened and sustained as the rhetor compels others to agree that what has been found is indeed trustworthy knowledge. “[T]he ardour of discovery is transformed into a craving to convince” (171). Here is no sovereign rhetor deploying eloquence to persuade an ignorant audience that such and such an action would be wisdom. Instead, the Polanyian rhetorician humbly engages in “a process of verification in which the act of making sure of one’s own claims is coupled with the effort of getting them accepted by others” (171). Unless the vision of beauty that originally summoned the discoverer to truth is incarnated in eloquence, wisdom evanesces.

This emphasis on abductiveness leads naturally to the final revision Polanyi offers *Vico*: an emphasis on the aural over the visual. Scholars familiar with *Vico*’s understanding of human knowing in *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*—especially his description of knowledge in textual and spatialized terms—will not be surprised by my criticism of his visualist intellectual habits. His analogy for the act of knowing, for example, is reading, not hearing. His explanation for what gives God superior knowledge is that the divine eyes are able to read to the very center of things, whereas humans are only able to read the world’s contours (Miner 97-98)—a decidedly spatial epistemology. In the *New Science*, too, *Vico* speaks of the eyes, not the ears, of the mind (152 391).

Polanyi’s understanding of the wisdom-eloquence relation is that wisdom is aural: it must be heard and heard *out*. This emphasis on hearing, rather than speaking, emerges especially in his call for fairness and tolerance “two main principles underlying the process of free discussion” (*SFS* 68). Unlike Vichian rhetoric, which tends to be sender-oriented (and so more voluble), Polanyian eloquence places a premium on good listening, and even “the capacity to listen to an unfair and hostile statement by an opponent in order to discover his sound points as well as the reason for his errors” (68). Eloquence is not packaging, which the rhetor uses to attract the audience, but rather a project in which speaker and hearer cooperate in order to make persuasion possible for both.

Besides the epistemological examples given above regarding *Vico*’s visualist approach to knowledge (spatial and textual analogies of knowing based on eyes, rather than ears), his understanding of rhetoric also suggests a privileging of the eye over the ear.¹⁵ In *Study Methods*, he impresses young people with the indispensability of the art of topics. This visualist aspect of traditional rhetorical theory depends on the faculty for mastering a series of key verbal “places” that remind the rhetor what is available to say in a given argument (19). Such topics as “genus,” “species,” or “definition,” are the rhetorical equivalent of hyperlinks: double-click on them and they download material for what to say on any subject. Now, as Ong has taken pains to argue, topics have wrongly assumed centrality in rhetorical theory by displacing the equally ancient means of argumentation called categories. Unlike topics, which are static, spatialized, impersonal, and disembodied, categories are aural, relational, thoroughly embodied. (For example, as Ong explains, a topic called “related items” would be a category called “relation.”) Category-driven rhetoric depends on predicates, “which can be brought against a subject[,]” as can be seen by the etymology of the word “category” itself, which evokes something aural, an “accusation” or “outcry” (Ong 104-107). Contrarily, *Vico*’s topic-driven rhetoric depends on “the art of finding ‘the medium,’ i.e., the middle term” in a syllogism (*Study Methods* 15). This itemizes rhetoric and tends to reduce argument to an aggregate of discursive chunks.

The dialogic quality of Polanyian rhetorical practice, on the other hand, makes it more aural than visualist. Granted, it is a *vision* of beauty that initially draws a discoverer “as a token of a hidden reality” (*PK* 189). But that beauty, betokening a hidden, fugitive truth, comes into its own as personal knowledge most richly by being brought into the realm of the interpersonal word, the domain of “conviviality [which] is usually made effective by a more deliberate sharing of experience, and most commonly by conversation” (210). As Josef Pieper writes, “The natural *habitat* of truth is found in interpersonal communication. Truth lives in dialogue, in discussion, in conversation. . . .” (36). I am not trying to say that Polanyi has a bias for the spoken word, over against print, but rather that his notions of wisdom and eloquence make more sense in analogues of hearing than in analogues of seeing.¹⁶

V.

Although Polanyi and Vico anticipated postmodern thought, both stand foursquare against the tendency of some postmodern scholars to think that the quest for wisdom (in the sense of truth originating from non-human sources) is needless. All that is needed, say some postmoderns, is eloquence, or the rhetorical construction of ever newer and more useful “truths.” In this understanding of the wisdom/eloquence dialectic, the primitive poets, which Vico denigrated and Polanyi praised, were simply doing what everybody is always doing: engaging eloquently in nominalist constructions of their own “wisdom.” Luft argues, for instance, that in the *New Science*, Vico “comes to understand that only if first men are by nature—that is, *genetically*—makers, only if their making is originary—that is poetic—only if it takes place in linguistic and social behavior and the physical labor made possible by bodily skills, can they make a human place in the world, a clearing in the forest” (113).¹⁷

This essay should have demonstrated that Polanyi and Vico stand together with the larger rhetorical tradition in saying that neither wisdom (as the pursuit of truth) nor eloquence (as the construction of truth) is dispensable.¹⁸ One responsible way to engage Vichian and Polanyian thought is to attend to the pendulum swing that Gay says moves back and forth between descriptions of the world as dependent or independent, as fixed or free (126-127).¹⁹ Although Polanyi’s more embodied, abductive, and aural understanding of wisdom and eloquence may enable a greater appreciation than Vico allows for the non-elective aspects of truth, the Italian humanist nonetheless manages, in a way Polanyi found difficult, to speak explicitly about the role of the divine in human history. At the end of the day, this acknowledgment of providence may do as much as Polanyian thought ever does to honor the given in tandem with the constructed in human knowledge. The two thinkers stand together, in any case, in their conviction that the human vocation is a tacking movement between constancy and contingency—or what Torrance calls “this elusive interlocking of dependence and independence that makes contingency so difficult to grasp and express” (*Trinitarian* 126). This is a way of being in the world in which the self is disposed in wisdom and found in eloquence.

Endnotes

¹ Miner summarizes the principle this way: “if cognition attains a *verum*, and *factum* is interchangeable with *verum*, then cognition may also be described as attaining a *factum*. But a *factum* is attained only through some process of making. Therefore cognition may be understood as essentially a process of making” (97).

² As for abstraction, Vico thought it had its place, but that it achieved a lower form of knowledge than that he sought with his new science (Miner 105). Against futurity, or the conviction that “the future becomes a primary orientation for both imagination and activity” (Berger 73), Vico proposed a cyclical view of history

(New 483-489 1097-1106). Against radical individualism, he emphasized the importance of tradition (Miner 115). Note, too, that Vico refers to a “barbarism of calculation,” a peculiarly modern selfishness resulting in societal breakdown that lasts until the survivors of decadence once again “naturally become sociable” (New 488 1106). I am indebted for this insight to Verene’s introduction to *On Humanistic Education*, where he connects Vico’s phrase “barbarism of calculation” to modernity (*Humanistic* 11) As for secularization, the *New Science* situated Vichian ideas in a metaphysics of providence (Miner 124-125). After modernism’s “barbarism,” he hoped for a return to the “religious, truthful, and faithful” (New 488-489 1106).

³ Some of Vico’s contemporaries, for example, were so committed to Cartesian methods of teaching and learning as to ignore the role of freedom in the creation (*Study* 33).

⁴ It all began with a thunderstorm. Early humans heard thunder and interpreted it as the rhetoric of Jupiter, the god of the sky. And though it wasn’t entirely clear what the thunder god was saying, “divine providence allowed humankind to be deceived into fearing Jupiter as a false deity who could strike them with lightning” (New 150 385). Men started dragging women to caves to hide their sexual acts, and thus marriage was created, “which we may define as a *carnal union modestly consummated in fear of some divinity*” (208 505). Lawgivers then arose, claiming to have deciphered the rhetoric of the god, and they founded nations (New 150 385). Eventually, the Gentiles, for whom “providence was the divine teacher of a common wisdom,” came to understand natural law (*Autobiography* 172).

⁵ Managing this tension gives him a remarkable generosity towards the intellectual habits of different eras. “In the hope of escaping censure, I ask you to give thought to the fact that my purpose is not to criticize the drawbacks of the study methods of our age or of those of antiquity, but rather to compare the advantages afforded by the study methods of the two epochs” (*Study* 5).

⁶ Richard Rorty might sum up Vichian thought by shrugging and calling it another entry in the longstanding “quarrel between poetry and philosophy, the tension between an effort to achieve self-creation by the recognition of contingency and an effort to achieve universality by transcendence of contingency” (*Contingency* 25). What else, after all, could Vico do? Privilege science, and he would lose the freedom of the humanities. Privilege poetry, and he would lose the rigor of science. Indeed, either choice offers unpredictable results. “It is ironic,” writes Roger Lundin, “that in their zeal to establish irrefutable arguments and unshakeable evidence for the truth, Descartes, Spinoza, and others made possible the relativism and nihilism of our present century” (246). Following Miner’s interpretation of Vico, the present essay tries to highlight the ways that Vico manages to avoid an easy dualism between science and poetry—an accomplishment that Polanyi managed as well.

⁷ I shall have more than one occasion in this essay’s comparison of Vico and Polanyi to remark that the two thinkers do not enjoy complete affinity. Vico is perhaps the readier to identify differences among ways of knowing than Polanyi, who was concerned to identify what was at least functionally common to human knowing across time.

⁸ To deny that Polanyi is concerned with wisdom may imply the conviction that fact ought to be compartmentalized from value. After all, a chemist and philosopher would supposedly be more interested in facts than values. But this a division that Polanyi says cannot be reconciled with the “personal co-efficient, which shapes all factual knowledge” (*PK* 17).

⁹ Interestingly enough, Polanyi refers to this renovating self-investment as “a manner of disposing ourselves” (61), a term which shares some kinship with an ancient rhetorical concept for the arrangement of an argument, “disposition.” Further research might be done to develop a genealogy of this term to show its connections with the rhetorical tradition. But the fact that Polanyi uses a rhetorical term does not alone establish its connection with the Ciceronian rhetorical tradition.

¹⁰ He cites Aristotle’s famous dictum that “[n]othing is found in the intellect which was not found first

in the senses” and sees this as a corroboration of his notion that poets, “the *sense* of mankind,” practice a knowing that is discrete from the epistemology of the philosophers, the “*intellect*” of the race (136-363).

¹¹ Admittedly, though Vico considers mimesis inferior to more modern ways of knowing, he argues that their poetic constructions were divinely guided for the establishment of civil societies. He holds that “the fables are true in their form, but false in their matter” (Miner 111). Another way to cast this is to say that while primitive eloquence was admirable, it did not lead to wisdom.

¹² He would not deny that providence has worked with such primitive minds for the common good of humankind, and perhaps he would allow that the barbarities of positivism might also conspire with the divine in order to find some measure of truth.

¹³ As Polanyi writes, “The process of selecting facts for our attention is indeed the same in science as among Azande; but I believe that science is often right in its application of it, while Azande are quite wrong when using it for protecting their superstitions” (*PK* 294). I am grateful to Phil Mullins for reminding me of the importance of Polanyi’s fallibilism at this point in my exposition.

¹⁴ I am grateful for this insight to Nothstine, Blair, and Copeland for their discussion of Sonja K. Foss’s textbook on rhetorical criticism. Her step-by-step procedure for writing criticism “is a crucial effort; each of the four moments she describes constitutes at least a locus for the choices that the critic must make” (54).

¹⁵ Granted, Vichian eloquence is aural in that it acknowledges the role of the audience, especially when he emphasizes the importance of probability, imagination, and memory in making persuasion possible (*Study* 13-14).

¹⁶ Other confirmations of this privileging of the aural appear in Polanyi’s continual contrasting of observation with indwelling (*PK* 378-379); his use of examples that diminish the importance of sight (*SFS* 22-24); his associating of positivism with mere observation (*PK* 9); his relativizing of perception (*PK* 96-97); and his insistence that knowledge is rooted, not in the mind watching the world through the eyes, but in the whole of the body (99). I should like to add that I first encountered the insight that Polanyi deemphasizes visualist epistemology in Jerry Gill’s fine book, *The Tacit Mode*.

¹⁷ It is peculiar that Luft, who painstakingly develops a non-genetic, non-linear, non-eidetic reading of Vico, nonetheless argues that scholars who overemphasize Vico’s metaphysics in *On the Most Ancient Wisdom* neglect the fact that the *New Science*, which she insists offers a completely different approach to metaphysics, came twenty years later. To emphasize the *New Science* over the *On the Most Ancient Wisdom* simply because it came two decades later is a markedly genetic, linear, and eidetic sort of scholarship.

¹⁸ Despite Luft’s insistence that Vico came to love the primitive’s poetic constructions, the opposite actually seems to be the case: Vico was not very impressed with what Miner calls the “mythopoesis” of the primitives. Despite Luft’s argument that primitive poets created as God creates—that is, by speaking things into existence out of nothing—Miner points out “that Vico takes the creativity of poetic man to fall infinitely short of divine creativity” (112). In fact, Miner continues, the Vichian project of developing a *scienza nuova* is to identify how human truth-seeking and truth-making can participate in divine creativity by means of an intellection that is more like that of the geometer than of the poet (113, 116, 124-125).

¹⁹ Western theology has tended either to overemphasize the *dependence* of the created order, thus minimizing human creativity and discouraging a genuinely empirical science, or to stress the independence of the created order in such a way as to suggest that it is *self*-supporting and *self*-interpreting, and thus entirely comprehensible by means of humanly devised sciences (*Gay* 127).

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Phil Mullins
Missouri Western State College
St. Joseph, Missouri 64507
Fax (816) 271-5680
Phone: (816)271-4386
E-mail: mullins@mwsc.edu

Walter Gulick
Montana State University, Billings
Billings, Montana 59101
Fax (406) 657-2187
Phone: (406) 657-2904
E-mail: WGulick@msubillings.edu