

February 15, 1988 (vol. 3, no. 12)

Dear Colleague:

History for Giovanni Battista Vico (1668-1744) is the orderly procession of ever deepening types of apprehension of the world. It is a story of progressive consciousness from a dim past of body language, through an intermediate stage of metaphors and myths, to his own "magnificent times" when language has acquired precision and transparency. It seems a typical self-congratulatory posture of the Enlightenment. But Vico is an original thinker: his ideas are radically different from those of his contemporaries. Earlier times are not just deficient stages to the enlightened present. They have their own virtues--including the virtues of their defects: for Vico, works like the Iliad and the Divine Comedy can exist only in a heroic age of avarice, cruelty, and arrogance. His own time has neither the requisite social condition nor the heated language to produce literature of that kind. Vico is not sentimental about the distant past: it is for him a time of savagery--"barbarism of sense"--in which people are locked in the private worlds of their own sensations and passions. But how does Vico characterize his own time? Magnificent, yes, but threatened with disintegration through an excess of awareness. His own time is characterized as "barbarism of reflection" (la barbarie della riflessione), in which each person is locked inside his own private world of thought.

Vico leads me to think of our own university. It is magnificent, but doesn't it suffer from "barbarism of reflection"? Are we not locked in our own disciplinary worlds, unable to speak to each other? Reflection not only isolates us; it attacks its subject matter, rendering it so transparent that it hardly exists. In the field of humanities, texts become pretexts--that is, occasions and excuses for elegant deconstruction. They lose their mystique. Their power to address us is negated by our power to read and interpret them. The cultural heroes and masterworks of "Western Civ" have been taken off their pedestals through acts of playful reflection. Enervated culture, Vico says, needs to be invigorated by new blood. Is not our new blood Ethnic Studies? In Ethnic Studies, deconstruction and playful criticism have not been carried quite so far. Martin Luther King is a hero in Ethnic Studies that even Lincoln cannot be in American History.

Best wishes,

*J. In*