

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

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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.