

The Italian Job: Giambattista Vico at the Origin of Edward Said's Humanism.

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Trying to define the term “humanism” in Edward Said’s work may lead to some discontent (Clifford, Young, Mellino). Indeed, Said does not give a satisfactory definition of the term. Moreover, he uses it in an apparently contradictory way. On the one hand, he shows that humanism is in some way the “father” of Orientalism - that is, it is a colonial and imperialist concept. On the other hand, not only does he use concepts and words typical of humanist disciplines, he also uses the very term humanism to qualify what he does. Only in his latest, unfortunately posthumous, book titled *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, he seems to reconcile with the idea of Humanism. Why does it take so long? Does Said truly reach a synthesis or does humanism remain in contradiction with Said post-structuralist, Foucaultian, attitude? In other words, is the work of Said inherently flawed? I propose to solve this dilemma by an overall re-thinking of Said thought, tracing a genealogy of his thought from the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico. I argue that only giving the right importance to Vico’s influence on Said it is possible to fully understand the significance of Saidian humanism. To this aim, first, I will show, the importance of Vico’s influence from a philological point of view. Second, I will explain some of Said’s critical practice through Vichian lens.

A Vichian Genealogy

The beginning of Said’s Vichian genealogy is the essay *Vico: Autodidact and Humanist* (1967). It is largely an interpretative, “technical” essay, seeking to show the premise of Vico’s humanism. Correctly, Said locates in Vico’s anti-cartesianism a key figure. This idea will remain important until latest Said’s works. Said presents Vico’s thought as an investigation of the (auto)creative faculty of man, particularly focusing on Vico’s theories on mind and language in their historical dimension. Mind, according to Said’s interpretation of Vico, is historically determined, not a-temporally defined, and hence inherently limited (“Vico: Autodidact” 346). The dramatic quality of Vichian humanism lies in the ambiguity both of reasoning and poetry, the other fundamental faculty of human mind. Vico, Said says, intends poetry in two ways: “one, as imaginistic and hence inadequate, and two, and creative and hence human and grand” (349). From this interpretation of Vico’s work Said elaborates an important critical stance: “The mind, scorning its ‘poetic’ origins, becomes an increasingly abstract instrument: it has merely passed from a poetic barbarism to a barbarism of reflection” (351-352). We will see later how profound is this Vichian stance in Said’s thought.

The book *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975) is a true Vichian book, in which Said uses Vico’s concepts and ideas to define an original epistemological perspective. It is useful to start

from the last chapter of this book. A (long) quote captures the essence of the issue at hand:

Here is a schematic list of seven Vichian signposts that have helped me, from the beginning, to discuss beginnings and to sketch a method: a) The initial distinction between the gentile or historical and the sacred or original-parallelizing my distinction between beginning and an origin. b) The combination in intellectual work of a special, idiosyncratic problem and a very strong interest in human collectivity a combination that occurs in this text from the beginning. c) An acute awareness not only of genealogical succession (except as its biological foundations obviously persist), but also of parallelism, adjacency, and complementarity - that is, all those relationships that emphasize the lateral and the dispersed rather than the linear and the sequential. d) A central interplay between beginning and repetition, or between beginning and beginning-again. e) Language as rewriting, as history conditioned by repetition, as encipherment and dissemination - the instability, and the richness, of a text as practice and as idea. f) Topics for critical analysis that do not fall neatly into the categories of commentary, chronicle, or thematic tracings. g) The beginning in writing as inaugurating and subsequently maintaining another order of meaning from previous or already existing writing (357).

The concept of *beginning* is crucial in Said's thought. While *origin* is something outside of the human realm, beginning is the act of invention of man (5-6). But, and this is the main point, man is not the rationally accomplished "Subject" of modernity, but rather a much more complex, and unfinished, being. What does this mean? That "human" does not mean a set of fixed quality, but the capacity to change and to invent according to material, political, and physical conditions. This is a consequence of how Said reflects on Vico's ideas: "As Vico's *New Science* demonstrates, the activity of beginning follows a sort of historical dialectic that changes its character and meaning during the processes of writing and intellectual production" (372). In other words, the idea of "beginning" is the center of the anti-essentialist idea of human that Said defines.

In 1976 Said writes another important essay on Vico. Titled *Vico on Discipline of Bodies and Texts*, the book discusses the relation between body and cultural productions. While *Beginnings* focused on texts, and words, in *Vico on Discipline of Bodies and Texts* Said analyzes the role of body in human knowledge, and in Vico's method: "Vico's way with texts is principally to push them back into the human struggles from which they emerge" (819-820). It is very important to learn how creative and productive the body is in Vico's thought: "With the adjective "poetic," for example, Vico was able to bring into his masterpiece *The New Science* (1744) a fairly wide repertoire of passionate, and sometimes violent, physical behavior, including copulation, bodily abuse of many sorts, and such outdoor activities as planting, building, and traveling" (817).

Said's masterpiece *Orientalism* (1978) is not explicitly a "Vichian" book, at least in the sense

in which *Beginnings* is so. *Orientalism* is quite different from the Said's works that came before it. It does not outline a method nor a theory, rather it constitutes an application of the "style of thought" he elaborates in *Beginnings* and other texts. Of course this is an oversimplification: *Orientalism* is theoretically interesting, in a very peculiar way. Said refers to Vico quite less in this book than he does in other books. Nonetheless Vico's presence is very important, because it appears in the most "theoretical" passages of *Orientalism*: "I have begun with the assumption that the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely there, just as the Occident itself is not just there either. We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities—to say nothing of historical entities—such locales, regions, geographical sectors as "Orient" and "Occident" are man-made" (4-5). Therefore, Vichian thought appears as the key reference to an anti-essentialist philology, the basis for the deconstructive enterprise of Said. Moreover, the Vichian lesson of *Beginnings*, the distinction between origin and beginning is still the center of Said's methodology (15-16). In later commentary on *Orientalism* Said is even more explicitly stating Vico's influence, as in the important 1995 afterword: "The central point in all this is, however, as Vico taught us, that human history is made by human beings. Since the struggle for control over territory is part of that history, so too is the struggle over historical and social meaning" (331-332).

Another important element of Said's connection to Vico appears in the foreword to 2003 edition of *Orientalism*, where Said explicitly, in the wake of the almost contemporary *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, considers Vico as an "alternative model": "Let me now speak about a different alternative model that has been extremely important to me in my work. [...] I must mention the supremely creative contribution of Giambattista Vico, the Neapolitan philosopher and philologist whose ideas anticipate and later infiltrate the line of German thinkers I am about to cite" (viii). The essay "Opponents, Audiences, Constituency, and Community" (1982) is another important element of Said's connection to Vico. Said defines his own politics of interpretation there starting from three questions: "Who writes? For whom is the writing being done? In what circumstances?" (1). The key point is the following statement: "Culture works very effectively to make invisible and even 'impossible' the actual affiliations that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship, on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force, on the other" (2). Here Said stands against specialism, technicism, and formalism, that separate texts from "life," creating a somehow "religious", closed interpretative community. Said, on the contrary, advocates for an open "secular" idea of interpretative community: "The secular realm I have presupposed requires a more open sense of community as something to be won and of audiences as human beings to be addressed" (19). Again, Said is outlining his critical perspective from his Vichian distinction between "origin" and "beginning". What is important here is that Said adds a more materialistic hint to his

reasoning, specifically a “Vico-gramscian” hint, almost an antidote to linguistic post-structuralism: “To the ideas of Kuhn, Foucault, and Fish we can usefully add those of Giovanni Battista Vico and Antonio Gramsci” (10).

Vico and Gramsci share the concern of letting religion out of what Vico calls “the world of nations” (*The New Science* 3; quoted in *Orientalism* 25). In other words, through Vico and Gramsci Said elaborates the idea that intellectual field must be thought as a community embedded of a man-made, therefore political, history. This kind of political history is the field where social and cultural changes happen, and where texts originate. Hence, texts are not politically “neutral” but part of the struggle for hegemony and common sense (“Opponents” 19).

From a methodological and epistemological point of view, this politics of interpretation implies to takes into account the “untidiness” of reality, that specialism and grand theories reduce to a politically functional order but ultimately leads to what Gayatri Spivak calls “epistemic violence” (280).

Said’s death made *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004) his spiritual testament. He was well aware of his illness, so it is not implausible that he actually meant the book to be just that. In any case, from the book it transpires Said’s will to return to his Vichian roots. In it, Said advances some Vichian assumptions in an even clearer fashion than before. First of all, Said reaffirms the paramount importance of Vico’s statement about facticity of society and cultures world: “For my purposes here, the core of humanism is the secular notion that the historical world is made by men and women, and not by God, and that it can be understood rationally according to the principle formulated by Vico in *New Science*, that we can really know only what we make.” Fittingly, Said’s recalls the Vichian notion of *sapienza poetica* “poetical knowledge” to define how man is not a passive consumer of knowledge but also an active creator (11).

In *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, a key element of the essay, “Vico: Autodidact and Humanist” reappears: the limitation of human mind: “Vico, I believe, takes the tragic view that human knowledge is permanently undermined by the ‘indefinite nature of the human mind’” (12). This makes structurally impossible a definitive and close knowledge of what human is. This is not to assert that nothing can be said on “Human.” On the contrary, it defines the epistemological conditions of the study of human: “Another way of putting this is to say that the subjective element in humanistic knowledge and practice has to be recognized and in some way reckoned with since there is no use in trying to make a neutral, mathematical science out of it” (12).

From *Orientalism* and other books, we know that, according to Said, Vico’s thought is what permits to define the “world of nations” as *man-made*. From *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, we know also that it is what makes humanism not the *definition* of “what is man” but, on the contrary, what makes it ontologically and epistemologically *indefinite* and constitutively open to human

agency. These two key assumptions define ontologically and epistemological the field of humanism. As we see, without Vichian premise Said would not be able to think humanism without a totalizing and essentializing notion of “human” (Scalercio). In a nutshell, it is possible to identify four main Vichian elements in Said’s humanism. First, worldliness; second, facticity; third, bodiliness; and fourth, poeticity.

Worldliness is the peculiar form of Saidian materialism. With this term Said means the implication that every cultural product is deeply involved in political, social circumstances of human making. Also, the term implies, but it is not limited to, secularism. Worldliness is the idea that metaphysical approaches must be eliminated from social sciences, and this includes some “impersonal,” that is inhuman, forces such as “the discourse,” “the unconscious,” “the market” (*Humanism* 15). Facticity is the idea that societies and cultures are man-made, and that there is a direct relation between what humans make and what they can know. This is the main element in *Orientalism*: every cultural entity, such as “Orient,” “Occident,” “Europe” is a man-made product that depends on an act of “beginning.” Poeticity is often an undervalued element of Said’s work. It is a fundamental character of words and text that often Said refers to. It appears the proper humanist approach, the linguistic side of facticity, worldliness, and bodiliness: “Polytechnical unlike any other human activity, language was discovered to be a suitable vehicle for posing questions of origin for purely linguistic as well as social, moral, or political reasons. Vico, miserable in his obscure position at Naples, sees the whole world of nations developing out of poetry” (*Beginnings* 47). I will analyze these four elements later in this article.

The Double Root: At the Beginning of Said’s Thought

It is clear the paramount importance of Vico in Said’s thought, but now I have to assess his specific weight comparing his other major sources. In other words, if it is doubtless true that Vico is a major source for Said, why should we consider him *the* major source, against the interpretations that understand Said’s thought as a postcolonial variety of Foucault’s post-structuralism (Clifford, Kennedy, Young)? With no doubt, Foucault influences greatly *Orientalism* and *Beginnings*, and Said acknowledges his intellectual debt to Foucault’s work (above all, *L’archeologie su savoir* and *Surveiller et punir*) (*Orientalism* 3). Understanding orientalism as a discourse in Foucault’s sense explains how the whole orientalist disciplinary apparatus can understand “Orient” in a coherent and unitary way, in the fields of politics sociology, literature, ideology and popular culture. Orientalism implies a network of disciplines that shapes knowledge in order to neutralize the agency of the oriental “Other”. Power and knowledge intertwine constantly and inextricably, with an endless course of opening of spaces of agency and discipline aimed to normalize and regulate them. This mechanism is a main feature of “the analysis of discourse,” that “operates between the twin poles of totality and

plethora. One shows how the different texts with which one is dealing refer to one another, organize themselves into a single figure, converge with institutions and practices, and carry meanings that may be common to a whole period. Each element considered is taken as the expression of the totality to which it belongs and whose limits it exceeds. And in this way one substitutes for the diversity of the things said a sort of great, uniform text, which has never before been articulated.” Production of discourse undergo to impersonal rules that regulate the “rarity,” that is the appearance of some enunciation, instead of others (*Archeology of Knowledge* 133-135). That is the way orientalist discipline and discourse work. The empirical variety of “Orient,” with its multiple possible enunciations, is referred to only possible meaning, built by institutions, political and epistemological practices, narrations, that refer each other and to an ultimate, secret and hidden, meaning, nonetheless able to rarefy enunciations on “Orient.”

Moreover, Said’s crucial distinction between origin and beginnings appear to be a kind of Foucauldian genealogical investigation. Foucault, as well as Said, develops a critique of the concept of “origin” as something unreachable: “What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 79). Foucault opposes “beginnings” to “origin”: “Where the soul pretends unification or the self fabricates a coherent identity, the genealogist sets out to study the beginning-numberless beginnings” (81). The historicity of beginnings brings Foucault to abandon the idea of a monolithic and transparent Subject: “It is vain to seek, beyond structural, formal, or interpretative analyses of language, a domain that is at last freed from all positivity, in which the freedom of the subject, the labor of the human being, or the opening up of a transcendental destiny could be fulfilled” (*Archeology of Knowledge* 126). This quote brings us to the dissociation between Foucault and Said. While Said shares Foucault’s distrust of the idea of a pure and free subject, he generates his own idea of beginnings as a manner to recuperate the *intention* of humans.

Said’s critique to modern “Subject” does not imply the “death of man,” rather to a poetic, political, historical conception of the idea of what human is. Indeed, in Said’s thought, the creation of subjectivity and agency does not originate in a rational Subject, free from politics, the Subject of liberal occidental modernity. Rather, that creation begins from the antagonistic dimension of power, of physical suffering, and creative elaboration of systems of meaning. In other words, what Said does is trying to think human from “the approximative, confused, and living background of ideas” that according to Foucault, cannot form concepts (*Archeology of Knowledge* 82).

It is useful to remind also that, according to Vico and Said, at the origin of every human creation, including ideas, lays the *body*. This is a major difference with Foucault that outlines a rather passive conception of the body: “The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a

volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 83). The differences I enumerated explain Said's criticism to Foucauldian conception of power, which Said considers "abstract" (*History, Literature, and Geography*, 467), totalizing (*The World, the Text, and the Critic* 244-247) and useless to elaborate instruments of resistance (*Power, Politics, and Culture* 214).

The study of Said's own genealogy, bringing his Foucauldian and Vichian roots, shows a complex relation between these authors with often unexpected proximities, analogies, differences. A major affinity between post-structuralism and Vico is the idea of the language as a condition of existence of human institutions. Notwithstanding the substantial differences that for Vico language has its beginning outside itself, both Vico and post-structuralists share the idea that language is not a mere representation of the idea, but it can create reality (Hobbs 2, 70).

The very nature of Vico's thought lends itself to a post-structuralist, Foucauldian interpretation, which may let Vico disappear behind the shadow of Foucault. This is not the appropriate place to discuss the relations between Vico and Foucault, however is useful to sketch out some observations. Direct references Foucault makes to Vico are few, but not absent, neither worthless. In *Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault refers to Vico as one of the authors that do not fit into his account of the development of *episteme*, particularly speaking of Vico's theory of history and philosophy of language (176, 199). Another direct quote is in *Discipline and Punishment*, where Foucault quotes, approvingly, the idea from *New Science* that old jurisprudence was "entire poetic" (45). In the essay "What is Enlightenment?" Foucault opposes Vico's idea of his present era as a "dawning of a new world" opposing it to Kant's definition of Enlightenment (34).

These few reference may be adequate to maintain that Foucault read Vico carefully, but they cannot suffice to speak of a direct influence of Vico on him, even if it is plausible that Foucault was somehow sympathetic with many of Vico's concepts such as the anti-essentialist notion of truth, the creative power of language, the historicity of epistemology, and, generally speaking, their "anti-originary, anti-mimetic, and anti-linear heuristics" (Hussein, 128). It is possible to see both Foucault and Vico as thinkers in search for new ways to conceive the activity of thought, and most important, this is the way Said see them, as Hussein notices (Hussein, 128-131). In *Beginnings*, Said maintains: "Foucault and Deleuze rejoin the adversary epistemological current found in Vico, in Marx and Engels, in Lukács, in Fanon" (378).

Said's Vichian Humanism

Let me now analyze the theoretical nature of Said's Vichian humanism. The first question deals with the reason why Said refers to humanism. As a first step, the answer is in Said's

dissatisfaction with post-structuralist and postmodernist thought. Both Lyotard and Foucault in their critique of modernity reach the same conclusions, that is to abandon modern “great narrations,” instead resistance has to focus on “local issues,” “games” or “micro-physics”: “In both Lyotard and Foucault we find precisely the same trope employed to explain the disappointment in the politics of liberation: narrative, which posits an enabling beginning point and a vindicating goal, is no longer adequate for plotting the human trajectory in society. There is nothing to look forward to: we are stuck within our circle”. Said sees a specific beginning of this disappointment: the authoritarian outcome of national liberation struggles in the “Third World” (*Culture and Imperialism* 26-27). After all, as Robert Young explains, anticolonial struggles have a lot to do with the birth of post-structuralism (Young 68).

The key to understand Said’s humanism is the phrase reported above: “We are stuck within our circle.” Said fears that the political outcome of poststructuralism was the neglecting of political agency, and deep individualism. Therefore, Said considers humanism as a way to escape from political, social and intellectual paralysis. The best way to understand his effort is start from *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. Interestingly, Said does not give a definition of humanism, and he is consciously doing so: “The real subject of this book is not humanism tout court, which is a subject altogether too large and vague for what I am talking about here, but rather humanism and critical practice”. Therefore, Said identifies humanism with *practice*: “Humanities concern secular history, the products of human labor, the human capacity for articulate expression (...) Humanism is the achievement of form by human will and agency” (15). Obviously, this is not a definition of a concept but the delimitation of the field of human agency: it is necessary to outline Saidian humanism or, better, humanist practice, from the four elements he takes from Vico: facticity, worldliness, bodiliness, poeticity, trying to define them theoretically.

Facticity is the foremost element of Saidian humanism, as the other three elements directly depend on it. It can be defined as the idea that cultures, society, politics, are man-made and, as a consequence, man can know them. This idea is the premise of *Beginnings*, but is more clearly stated in *Orientalism* and *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. This idea is clearly the basis for his enterprise, as I noted earlier. This use of Vichian facticity is theoretically sound. It aims to reconnect three elements that would be otherwise isolated: the acknowledgment of human agency; the anti-essentialist view of cultural products; and the political conflicts about the definition of such cultural products. This makes clear a theoretically important element; there is no *social meaning* before man makes it. In other words, no meaning exists before a struggle on it.

Worldliness regarded as “Said’s most significant contribution to critical theory” (Ashcroft 74; see also Hall 263), is a direct derivation from facticity and indicates the epistemology Said draws from facticity. Facticity implies that man makes society, essentially through power *and* knowledge,

that is through a struggle on meanings. Accordingly, worldliness means that the very work of humanist is to show the network of power and knowledge from which every cultural and social product develops. Two implications derive from worldliness. First, accordingly to the principle of facticity, no text exists before social and political struggles. Second, the predominance of texts over others has to be understood in terms of hegemony (*Orientalism* 7, 12). Bodiliness is, as I already noted, one of the key elements of Vico's thought that inspires Said. Body is an ineliminable insurgence that breaks any abstract representation. Part of the process developing in XIX century leading to modern orientalism is separating words from body (*Orientalism* 147-148). Body is a fundamental part of Saidian humanism because it is a limit to what can be abstractly thought: "we aren't disembodied brains or poetry machines". (*Power, Politics and Culture* 81). This means that body is the origin on knowledge and that it has always material, physical and historical basis. Here the Saidian-Vichian conception of beginning appears again. In effects, the material birth of knowledge is an "atavistic" trace that remain, making a pure rational, abstract knowledge impossible ("Vico on the Discipline" 822). So, Said maintains that Vichian philology consists in searching the bodily beginning of texts.

It may seem surprising to consider *poeticity* as a fundamental element of Said's humanism, since the paramount relevance he gives to body. On the contrary, the very interest for body leads to poeticity, because poetry is not opposed to body and worldliness, but to abstractions and "pure theory". Indeed, it is the key element of Said's conception of language and representation. The question is: if body prevents the possibility of an abstract, fully rational, linguistic representation of "human," how can humans speak? It is useful to remember that Said's criticism about language affects two, apparently opposite, views: the modern idea of language as a mere representation of the idea, and the structuralist idea that language is "a rational tool that, through strategic oppositions, structurations, and transformations, explains various spheres of human activity as instances of its own mode of functioning" (Hussein 124; see also Radhakrishnan 57). So poeticity appears as an alternative able to "open" the language to human agency rejecting linguisticity as well as the idea of a language as mere representation. If worldliness and bodiliness are the "materialistic" side of facticity, poeticity is the linguistic one. Of course, we must not think of them as two separate elements, but as intimate interconnected. In fact, the process of "making" implied in Said's idea of history is a creation both material and cultural. Ambivalence is one of the main features of poeticity: Said is not an "imagination enthusiast," because poetry is not inherently positive. For example, orientalism cannot be conceived without a *poetical* act of dominion that *creates* "Orient." Particularly, in *Orientalism* Said analyzes how the familiarity with Orient is a sort of poetic outcome (*Orientalism* 54-55).

However, it would be a mistake to oppose a poetic, thus false, reality, to a rational, thus real, one. On the contrary, highlighting the poetic nature of "the world of nations," reveals how every

representation must be considered provisional and, if it is presented as “real,” false. In other words, only representations that admit his worldly and poetical beginning may be accepted. There is a space where rationality and “myth” melt together, “‘the beginning,’ belonging as often to myth as to logic, conceived of as a place in time, and treated as a root as well as an objective, remains a kind of gift inside language” (*Beginnings* 43). This space, that I called poeticity, leads to reconsider and enlarge the meaning of “reason,” in order to displace a “traditionalist” and “scholastic” idea of reason with a “turbulent” and “aggressive” one, that Said describes with reference to surrealism and sur-rationalism (*Beginnings* 40).

Said’s thought would be weak if we do not highlight the relation between the idea of a world “developing out of language” and the idea of poeticity. Said’s attention to the creative side of language and of reason can be understood only if we reconnect it to a political, worldly, attitude. In his Reith Lectures, Said notes that one way intellectuals have to intervene in public debate is *abduction*, that is “project a better state of affairs and one that corresponds more closely to a set of moral principles - peace, reconciliation, abatement of suffering - applied to the known facts.” (*Representations of the Intellectuals* 99-100; *Power, Politics, and Culture* 52). The exact meaning of “project” is difficult to identify, but the reference made to Peirce’s idea of abduction may give some clue. Rejecting both deduction and induction, Said shows the need for a more open fashion to think about human activity, reconnecting with the ideas he expresses in *Beginnings* about surrationalism. Both abduction and surrationalism form part of Said rethinking of mental faculty of man through language, that I called poeticity. In Vico’s term we can call this side of poetry “topics”: “Topics has the function of making minds inventive, as criticism has that of making them exact” (Vico 150)

Said’s Humanist Practice

If humanism is not a theory of man but a practice, Said’s humanism should be identified with his *praxis*. Said’s humanistic practice, on the basis of Vico’s categories, is to push the texts back into their worldly and bodily roots. Said pursues this goal by means of different intellectual tasks. The first, and maybe the most widely known, is the re-reading of western literature, and culture in general, in order to show their ethnocentric and essentializing assumptions. This is the task of books such as *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*. The aim of Said is to show the impossibility to consider humanities as the “pure” fields of reflection and inspiration by means of methodological instruments such as “traveling theory” (*The World, the Text, and the Critic* 226-247) and “contrapuntal reading” (*Culture and Imperialism*, 66-67; see also Wilson), that constitute the Saidian form of Vichian poetic philology.

Here it is fundamental to avoid the idea that intellectual role is to “give voice” to subalterns, that is a newer, more subtle, form of epistemic violence. Said is not totally immune from it: “We must

therefore read the great canonical texts, and perhaps also the entire archive of modern and pre-modern European and American culture, with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented” (*Culture and Imperialism* 66). Later, however, Said explicitly notes the danger of the idea to “give voice” to subaltern. In his *Foreword to Selected Subaltern Studies*, Said says that the task was “to supply the narrative, or to supplement the existing narrative with a new narrative” (vii). In an interview for Italian review *Aut Aut*, Said explains that “the task of radical intellectual is the construction and redefinition of the archive” (“Gli Intellettuali e l’alterità” 92-93, my translation). In other words, Said moves from a purely “critic” attitude to one more positive, creative, inventive or “topical”. Said’s works on Palestine is largely an outcome of this humanistic topical practice. In the essay “Permission to Narrate” (1984), Said defines the conditions permitting to deal with the peculiar situation of Palestine:

What makes it possible for us as human beings to face the facts, to manufacture new ones, or to ignore some and focus on others? Answers to these questions must reside in a theory of perception, a theory of intellectual activity, and in an epistemological account of ideological structures as they pertain to specific problems as well as to concrete historical and geographical circumstance (47).

As I am arguing in this article, this required philosophy is the Vichian humanism that Said develops. In the same essay, Said adds a very interesting observation: “None of these things is within the capacity of a solitary individual to produce; and none is possible without some sense of communal or collective commitment to assign them a more than personal validity” (47). This is important because it shows as the intellectual cannot speak for anybody. Instead, what s/he can do is produce from *within* a collectivity, trying to testify his *affiliation*, even if not an uncritical *filiation* (*The World, the Text, and the Critic*, see the *Introduction*).

From the beginning of Said’s first book on the theme, *The Question of Palestine* Said focuses on the scarcity of the archive on Palestine (vii). His work to enlarge Palestinian archive is a key part of his humanistic project. He does not want to *theorize* on “how Palestinians can speak,” but he carries out a historiographical practice, aimed to disclose the material condition that permits, or rather does not permit, the arise of a narration of Palestinian history. The question of Palestine is not a question of “theory” or “representations,” but something bodily and worldly. History is always the place where struggles happen and it leaves on human bodies traces that do matters. This is what Said’s reference to the “gravity of history” means: a call for more attention to consequence of oppression, of hunger, of physical and psychological wounds on human agency and to the faculty of reacting. Suffering, therefore, is “the main issue for the intellectual today” (“Reflections on Exile” 503).

Remembering this suffering is one of the tasks of a humanist intellectual, not as mere

empathy, but as a part of a philosophy of the body. Together with Vico, Walter Benjamin is an important reference here, particularly where Said quoting him says that “the great procession of victory trails in its wake the forgotten bodies of the vanquished” (“Reflections on Exile” 504). Incidentally, we must note that Said’s quote is not literal but adds the word “bodies,” giving to the text a more Vichian hint. The suffering of Palestinian people is, therefore, the beginning of the question. Said does not defend the Palestinian cause because of abstract nationalism; neither on the basis of the abstract idea of “right to auto-determination” or the sovereignty of the Palestinians. Nowhere as in Palestine, the rational and abstract means of occidental modernity fail to grasp the complex intertwining between politics, identity, and culture. The rational and formalistic attempt by UN to solve the dilemma by geometrically dividing Palestine into two homogeneous parts proves to be just an ingenuous illusion, while later attempts to stop the conflict by means of legal agreements fell through face the complex conflicting political situation of Middle East.

Therefore, the mere (re)construction of the archive is not the only aspect of the “topical” task of humanist. In order to avoid the danger of the development of essentialist, closed political and cultural project he has to re-write cultural archives, also imagining “abductive”, topical, projects.

According to Hussein there is a “utopian” dimension in Said’s thought, and precisely this dimension explains his reference to Vico (Hussein 69; 129-131). The problem with the idea of “utopia” is that does not give full account of Said’s worldly thought, giving to it a rational and abstract meaning. As I noted earlier the word “topics” defines more precisely the poetic side of Said’s humanism. It defines the act to *create* representations, starting from material circumstances, trying to open the meaning of words, according to the mechanism that I have earlier named *poetry*.

Topics permit to avoid the crystallization of identity that, according to Said, must be the main task of a humanist. Said’s critic to the idea of “home” and, above all, the pledge for the “bi-national” solution to the question of Palestine are key points of his topical thought (The One-State Solution; see also C. Hussein; Raz-Krakotzkin).

Conclusion

Many interpreters of Said’s thoughts dismiss or misunderstand the nature of Saidian humanism, because they ignore his Vichian roots, either partially or totally. Said’s anti-theoretical, anti-essentialist stance does not come from a “post-modern” eclectic attitude but from his lifelong reflection on Vico. From the Italian thinker he outlines his assumptions: the indefinite nature of man, the idea that man makes culture and society and that we can know them by knowing how they begin. Saidian humanism is not “residual,” but it is fully identified with a praxis, which means both the work of man making the world and the humanistic, critical and topical, work. These two sides of humanism by no way can be separated, because only acknowledging that culture and society depend on the

making of man permits to humanism to elaborate a worldly critical praxis.

Humanism deals, of course, with the “human.” Said in *Orientalism*, and all his other works, shows how the “human” has been a category used to inferiorize, dominate, subjugate. Both nationalism and universalism draw from this essentialist idea of “man.” Nationalism essentializes “culture” by making it a totality within which any kind of oppression can be potentially justified. Moreover, this kind of culturalism can justify exclusions of any social group assumed not sharing the same cultural background. Universalism, reducing human to a “standard set” of features, may justify any sort of imperialist pedagogy aimed to convert “them” into “us.” Saidian-vichian humanism enables to think about “global humans” without any of these shortcomings.

At the same time, humanism deals with the possibility to imagine agency in a world made global by capitalism, migrations, technological and environmental predicaments. If local struggles do not want to be merely localistic, to imagine a new human is mandatory, not in order to reach some agreement about what human is, but to understand what makes possible the concrete not necessarily peaceful, coexistence. Of course, this new humanism must be indefinite, bodily, worldly and poetic, just as Vico and Said maintain, because only this kind of humanism may take into account the precarious nature of human life, his constant material and symbolic need to recognize and create his existence.

Humanistic practice shows how worldly history is the basis for the understanding of culture. This makes impossible also another fetish of contemporary reflection: “multicultural dialogue”. Obviously this does not mean that coexistence between culture is impossible, but that it is a radically insufficient means to overcome the problems that arise simply by elaborating abstract solutions, or, on the contrary, merely “deconstructing” cultural representations. The worldly nature of humanism prevents the idea that intellectuals may somehow have a “leading” task, because they have no privileged knowledge of human nature, since human nature is what emerges from worldly struggles. This implies a rethinking of intellectual works, aimed not to elaborate neutral or more inclusive representations but to show how power affects minds, bodies, and societies.

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