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Vico

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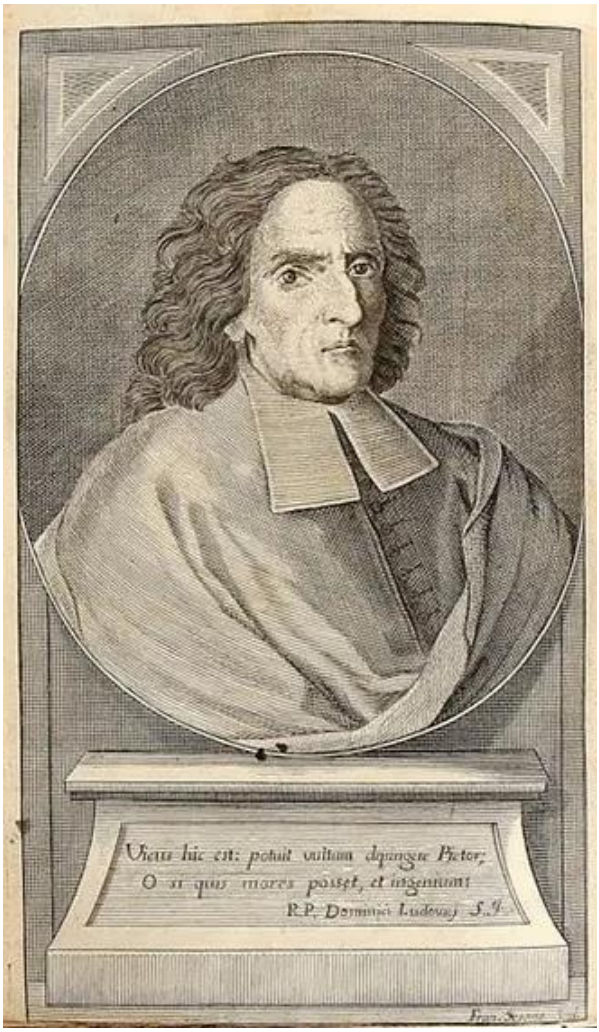
Vico

A lecture delivered at the Italian Institute, London, 6 May 1969



IB had this portrait of Vico (the frontispiece to the first edition of the Scienza nuova*, 1744) pinned on the door between his study and his library*

VICO'S LIFE is a sad story. He was born in 1668, the son of a poor bookseller in Naples. He suffered a fall in his youth. He became a hunchback. He was condemned to poverty all his life. Such learning as he had he obtained partly from reading books in his father's bookshop, partly from the visitors who called there and helped him with his career. All his life he wanted a particular chair in the University of Naples which he never completely obtained. He spent his life as a poor, obscure hack in the city of Naples, known to his fellow citizens for his erudition, a little grim, a little eccentric, writing funerary inscriptions for rich men, biographies of notables, trying to dedicate his works to people who might pay for his publications, the most important of whom – Pope Clement VII – ultimately did not do so. One of his sons was a criminal, one of his daughters was half mad, and his bad luck pursued him after his death. His works were read in his native city, but not much elsewhere. A few cognoscenti in Venice, perhaps, knew about him, a few in Europe, but in the world of the great *lumières*, in the world of the early eighteenth century, the great notables, people like Voltaire and Montesquieu (although it has always been maintained that Montesquieu read Vico, this is very doubtful), Fontenelle, Christian Wolff, Hume – the people who dominated the minds of the first half of the eighteenth century – had never heard of him, and did not know what he had done. And yet in some respects he was a bolder, more striking, more original thinker than any of them, save perhaps Hume.

It is a very odd thing, which seldom happens in history, that a man of such penetrating and extraordinary genius should remain unrecognised for so long. When he was recognised, of course he was praised, lauded to the skies, then forgotten again, then disinterred, praised again and once again forgotten, and so on through endless cycles of being remembered and forgotten, remembered and forgotten. At present a certain amount of recognition of Vico's talents is occurring in the world, but I have no doubt that in twenty years' time he will be forgotten again. This is his strange fate.

If you ask why this is so, it is difficult to explain. It is partly, of course, because of the difficulty of the ideas, partly because of the extreme obscurity of the style. There is a certain sense in which Vico's later work, his great *Scienza nuova*, is unreadable, and therefore people cannot be expected to read it. Partly this is due to the fact that too many ideas are struggling for expression at the same time, that he was a fervid, unsystematic writer who could not bear not to say everything that he knew about everything, and therefore stuffed into his writings every possible quotation, every possible reference, every possible idea as it came to him in chaotic disorder. This makes his writing extremely rhapsodic, but does not make for clarity or readability, with the result that poor Vico is perpetually condemned to tantalise people and to exhaust them.

Now I shall try to make good my claim about Vico's originality. Let me list what I consider to be his achievements.

Vico is almost the first thinker who put forward the notion that human beings and objects are better understood not as entities, lumps or things, but as some kind of processes of growth; that is to say, the first person to lay down the proposition that truly to understand something is to understand how it grew, whence it came, how it came to be what it was – the genetic approach really originates with him. He could be said to have discovered a new type of knowledge, or at least to have emphasised it and identified it, and that is also something very rare in the history of thought. He gave a new sense to the word 'creativeness', which is so abused today. He developed a new theory of language, a new theory of mythology and symbolism, a new theory of what human beings intended to do by the various customs, religious rites, laws and institutions in which they lived, what the meaning of these things is, how they are to be classified and understood and analysed. He had a brand new and very original theory of mathematics. He virtually invented the idea of culture, that is to say, the idea that, in any given age, various manifestations of that age, artistic, intellectual, historical, various aspects of human activity, public, private, secular and religious, all emanate from the same central source and all display a certain likeness, a pattern which penetrates

them all. This is a proposition which was never uttered explicitly by any thinker before him, and therefore the notion of a culture, and the notion of a civilisation as such, the whole notion of periodising human history, of conceiving human history as a kind of succession of cultures, or of distinguishing one culture from another by some kind of central pattern which informs them, so that you can attribute various manifestations, artistic or scientific, or various forms of human action, to the culture of which they are the expression – this, which is now a commonplace, originates with him. He drew a distinction between the method of the sciences and the method of the humane studies which, whether it is valid or not, has since become a subject of passionate discussion among philosophers and other persons interested in the methods of science and the methods of knowledge from his day to ours. It is just as alive and burning an issue today as it ever has been.

This is a sufficient achievement for any man, and yet he has never obtained his due, and perhaps will never obtain it. He is not canonical – not in the great canon of classical philosophers. He is not with Plato and Aristotle and Descartes and Spinoza and Leibniz and Berkeley and Hume and Kant and Hegel and the others. He will always remain apocryphal, he will always remain an object of specialised interest on the part of certain peculiar cognoscenti, who, having discovered him, get into a condition of enthusiasm, but find it difficult to infect other people with their feelings.

Let me say something about these achievements, more or less in chronological order. Vico began his life, as I said, as a poor man. He was taught by various Jesuit priests. He obtained a very sound classical education for his time. He was throughout his life a devout Christian, and his education occurred at a moment when the whole trend of Italian education, even in the comparatively reactionary kingdom of Naples, tended towards science, secularism, humanism, anti-medievalism of various kinds. The dominant influence was that of Descartes and his pupils, and at first Vico fell under that influence. More than that, he read Lucretius, he read various forbidden Epicurean authors, with evident enthusiasm, and was

affected by certain things in their writings for the rest of his life, although he tends to conceal this out of general clerical caution: he was not the bravest of men. When the Spaniards ruled Naples he wrote an account of a conspiracy against Spanish rule in which he damned the conspirators, who were executed as traitors to their country and a band of criminals. When the Austrians came in, these persons were acclaimed as martyrs and heroes, and Vico duly wrote an encomium of them. This kind of inconsistency is not entirely unknown among men of letters. He was an extremely brilliant and extremely profound thinker, but not the most courageous of human beings.

One of the theses of Cartesianism was a certain contempt for humane studies and for history in particular. The glories of seventeenth-century science were of course very clear to all. Magnificent progress had been made in the natural sciences because at last methods had been discovered for the assertion of certain adamantine, irrefutable propositions about nature. From these, by means of rigorous logical argument, it was possible to draw certain conclusions which could then be verified by observation. The science of Galileo and his followers, Torricelli, Descartes and other scientific figures of the seventeenth century, formed the glory of the age. Descartes, when he considered the humanities, maintained that unless you could have clear definitions, unbreakable, rigorous logical method, conclusions which were as certain as the premisses from which they were drawn, a strict body of science, systematically developed by means of irrefutable rules, human knowledge could not advance. If you looked at history this was plainly not the case. Where were the axioms? Where were the theorems? Where were the logical rules? What could be established? No doubt, if one was interested in history, which was ultimately a collection of amusing gossip by a number of persons interested in the human past, an intelligent man might pass a pleasant hour or two, but it was not an occupation for a serious person. Even if you learnt as much Latin as contemporary scholarship could provide, even if you delved into the antiquities of Rome with the greatest possible acuity and precision, what

would you know, asked Descartes, that was not known to Cicero's servant girl? And simply to spend all this time, to expend all this activity, in discovering what Cicero's servant girl knew was not a dignified object of human activity. In science we build on the shoulders of our predecessors: some kind of progress occurs. Each generation advances beyond the next. In classical scholarship all that you can do, at best, is to uncover knowledge of the past, which in itself offers no guide to the future of any kind. As for the study of languages, why were Latin and Greek all that much more of interest than Provençal or Breton?

That was one kind of attack on history – that is to say, simply its absence of logical method, absence of scientific structure. Another kind of attack on history came from a different quarter. It came from various sceptics of the sixteenth century. After all, they said, what is history? Historians are biased, they are passionate, they have all kinds of irrational drives, they are corrupt, they write for princes, they are partisan, they are politically influenced, they are often ignorant, they invent, they contradict each other. What kind of truth can historians possibly provide? Even if they are honest, even if they are 'objective', there are two kinds of historians. All history is ultimately founded on eyewitness evidence. Well, the eyewitness is either engaged in the thing which he is writing about, or he is not. If he is engaged in what he is writing about, he is partisan. He belongs to one side or the other and he is bound to be biased. If he is not engaged, if he is objective and neutral, how can he find out what is happening? The people who take part in these things will not give him classified information. He will not know what really happened, and therefore he has to make do with all kinds of bits of gossip which he gets from interested parties, each of whom is trying to make him believe what he wants him to believe. Therefore historians are either biased or they are ignorant, and the whole of history is just a tissue of old wives' tales. This kind of attitude to history had already arisen at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and became quite prominent towards the end of it.

All this Vico found insufferable. He was deeply interested in history, and particularly the history of law. He was sunk in Roman antiquities. He was a typical antiquarian scholar, with a fanatical desire to acquire information of every possible kind, and he found it unbearable that this kind of insult should be offered to history. So he began by carrying the war into the enemy territory. He asked himself what it was that Descartes regarded as true knowledge. True knowledge, of course, since the days of Plato, was regarded as mathematical. Mathematics was the one great science, strict, rigid, irrefutable, living in a kind of crystal ball of its own, untouchable by empirical events, eternal, beautiful, symmetrical, true for all men in all places at all times. Vico concedes all this, but, he says, if you ask yourself why mathematics has these marvellous properties, why mathematics is so utterly true and wonderfully deduced and so demonstrative, the reason for this is that men invent it themselves. This was a very bold proposition, which found no echo until the twentieth century, when some schools of philosophy certainly accept it.

What is mathematics? Mathematics was regarded by Descartes as some kind of copy or transcript of the bones or skeleton of reality. Not so, says Vico. Mathematics is a lot of symbols which we invent, plus a lot of rules which we also invent. It is a game. Naturally if we invent a game we can understand it. Imagine, for instance – although he does not use this example – that in a game of chess you were to ask: 'How do you know that the king in chess never moves more than one square at a time?' Or suppose someone were to say to you: 'You say that the king in chess never moves more than one square at a time, but four evenings ago I saw the king move two squares.' This would not be regarded as evidence fatal to the claim that the king in chess never moves more than one square at a time, because the reason he moves one square at a time is that there is a rule that he moves one square at a time. If there is a rule, there is a rule – the rule is invented by you. The whole of mathematics is simply obedience to man-made rules, and therefore, although mathematics is true, although mathematics is

valid, although mathematics is pure, that is because we invented it ourselves.

Vico goes back to an old medieval proposition that the only things which we truly understand are things which we ourselves make. God understands the world because God has made the world. We have not made the world, and therefore do not understand it in the way in which God does. He is the author of the world and understands it more or less in the way in which Shakespeare understands *Hamlet*. There is nothing about *Hamlet* which Shakespeare does not understand, because he made it, and therefore *Hamlet* is transparent to him. The same thing is precisely true of God in relation to the world, but we who have not made the world see only the outer surface. All we can say is that one thing is earlier than another, or one thing later than another. There was something there before other things, or later than them, or simultaneously with them. We can simply describe what goes on, describe the appearances of things, describe their behaviour, but if you say, 'Why are they here in the way in which they are?', not we but only the author can say.

We can say we know mathematics, because we have made it, but we cannot know, for example, physics in the sense in which Descartes claims we can know it, because physics is about matter. Matter is opaque, matter is given. By applying mathematics we are able to trace the movements or behaviour of matter, but the stuff itself is in a certain sense impenetrable, because we have not made it. We have not made the elements out of which the earth or air or water is made, and since we have not made them, we have the external view of the observer. Therefore, although mathematics is no doubt the most perfect of the sciences, it is so only because it gives no information. Anything which gives information is *pro tanto* not fully knowable except to those who have made it. The author knows his works; an artist understands his work of art; the observer can only observe and describe. He cannot give the reasons for which a thing is as it is. Therefore mathematics is true but empty. Physics is a little better than mathematics because it describes the world, but at the expense of not knowing quite so much. Hence he

degrades physics to a level below that which Descartes accorded it, and degrades all the sciences of an applied kind to a level below that of complete knowability, about which Descartes had talked.

Next, he moves on to the question of the humane sciences. He really reached this position only in about 1720, when he wrote his famous legal treatise *De uno* (*Il diritto universale*).[1] Since we can only understand what we ourselves make, and since we do not make nature, nature for ever remains opaque to us. True, there have been people who thought they understood nature, for example primitives, who peopled nature with all kinds of ghosts, with all kinds of souls – naiads, dryads – all those who espoused anthropomorphic or animist theories that peopled the entire world with animate creatures, all those to whom trees were alive, to whom the rivers were alive, to whom seas were alive with all kinds of creatures moving about inside them, and who conceived nature as a kind of living whole.

This we no longer accept. It has been superseded. But all that is wrong with anthropomorphism, all that is wrong with animism, is that you attribute human qualities to non-human entities. There must, however, be entities to which these qualities can be applied. Anthropomorphism is only to be rejected if it is applied to non-human nature, but presumably there is a nature to which it can reasonably be applied, namely that of men. Our knowledge of men must in principle be different from our knowledge of nature, because in the case of human beings we can ask questions which we cannot ask of nature. We can ask about a man what motive impelled him to act. Men have purposes, men have ends, men have motives, men are subject to fears and hopes and ambitions. In their human relations they have a certain vision of life which they strive to realise. They have certain ideals. They are moved by all kinds of passions and rational objectives. All these things they know, and therefore they can ask themselves why they act as they do. We do not know why the stone is where it is, because we are not God. We

[1] *De universi juris uno principio et fine uno*, 1720–2 (the first part of *Il diritto universale*).

do not know why it was made; we simply record the fact that it is where it is. In the case of ourselves, however, we can say that we act as we do, to some degree at any rate, because of various motives that we know.

How do we know these? We know them by introspection. We know them in the same way as we know what it is to fear, what it is to love, what it is to resist, what it is to strive; we know this by direct experience, and we know this not only about ourselves, we know it about other human beings too. We know it about other human beings not only by analogy, not only by thinking that other human beings are like ourselves, but simply through the process of intercommunication. We live in society, we speak to them, they speak to us. If you ask yourself how you understand what a man is saying to you, you do not go into an enormous inductive experiment, saying that so far as one knows these noises are commonly employed by persons for the purpose of indicating certain things for which the evidence is such and such; that if you consider these noises as made by Danes, as made by Italians, as made by Portuguese, as made by Chinese, there is a certain amount of evidence to the effect that these noises commonly are intended to symbolise this and that. That is not how we understand other people, or even always try to justify the claim that we have understood them. We understand them directly. Human intercommunication is some kind of direct experience of action, and man understands action from inside. The actor himself understands action in a different way from that in which the observer understands it. A man who observes sees the outside; a man who acts understands from inside.

This notion of the inside view, or what it is to understand an action from the point of view of the actor, is Vico's central point. If this is true about men's dealings with one another; if we understand what expressions mean on people's faces without having to go through long scientific processes of comparing them with expressions on other people's faces, and so on; if children cry when their mothers are angry without having had long experience of what their own face would look like in the mirror if they were

angry; if there is some kind of direct acquaintance with mood, or the inner condition of human beings, through outer symbolism – not just symptoms but symbols, such as expressions on faces, gestures, words, that kind of thing – if that is so about the present, there is no reason why it should not also be so about the past.

We understand history, therefore, because the past speaks to us, almost literally speaks to us. When we see buildings, when we see manuscripts, when we see paintings, we are aware of voices speaking; human beings are trying to express themselves in certain ways, they are trying to impress other people, they are trying to speak to God, or to each other, or they are trying to express their nature; the fact that we are at some distance from them merely makes it more difficult to catch what they are saying. Nevertheless they are human beings, they are to some degree similar to us, and therefore it is possible to communicate through time.

In this sense you can say that history, so far as it is the history of human activity – men trying to do something in the world – is made by men, and because it is made by men it can be known by men, in a sense in which those things that are not made by men cannot. Hence Vico's tremendous distinction, which has echoed from his day to ours, between the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*, between the natural sciences, where we can merely observe and describe, and the human sciences, where we seek not only to describe, but also to understand. This covers not only history, but scholarship and the humanities of every sort, the understanding of works of art, the understanding of every form of human self-expression, where it is not simply a question of analysis and description, but also a question of understanding – what later German thinkers talked about under the title of *Verstehen*. Of this Vico is certainly the author.

How do we do this? What is the actual process? According to Vico there are three great gates into the understanding of human beings, particularly in the past. One is through language, one is through mythology, one is through institutions.

Take language first: Vico's point is that men use words in particular ways at particular moments of their development, and

through the tracing of the kinds of words they use you can trace the development of their view, of their vision, of the world. Take the case of metaphor, which is one of his strongest possible cases. When people say 'My blood boils', later thinkers maintain that metaphors of this kind are simply used by poets, or even prose writers, simply to enhance their meaning, to make it more interesting, to titillate taste, to make the effect a little more intense, simply as an embellishment of what would otherwise be a very flat and boring way of talking. Vico says that this is done only because these metaphors have already been used in the past in a more direct way by primitive men. When you read their literature, you will find that they say that 'Blood boils round my heart', because to them anger, which is what they are talking about, is literally more like something boiling round their hearts than it is now to us. When they talk about the mouths of rivers, or the teeth of a plough, or the bowels of the earth, or of veins of minerals, or use any of the other metaphors which are simply drawn from the human body, it is because they conceive of the world as having a heart, as having bowels, as having veins of this kind, because the world to them is animate, and because they conceive of a river as a semi-animate creature which has a mouth, because they conceive of a mountain as something which has a brow, because they conceive of a plough as something which actually has teeth. This is closer to them than it is to us, it is a natural mode of expression. It is not an artificial usage which sophisticated persons have invented for the purpose of making themselves more amusing. It is literally a way of visualising the universe.

He goes further than this. When an ancient poet says 'Jovis omnia plena'[2] – 'Everything is full of Jove' – what, he asks, does this mean? Jove is a thunderer on Olympus, Jove is the father of the Gods, Jove is a huge divine figure with a beard who hurls thunderbolts, but also Jove is the sky. Now, how can one and the same thing be a bearded thunderer *and* the sky? How can Cybele

[2] Virgil, *Eclogues* 3. 60. Vico, *New Science*, § 379 (hereafter references to this work are given in the form 'NS 379').

be an enormous woman and also the whole earth? How can Neptune be a god holding a trident, and also every ocean and every sea in the world? Of course, Vico says, to us this is meaningless – these things are impossible and totally unintelligible. We cannot understand how somebody can be a bearded old man and also the sky, but *they* could; and therefore it is important when reading these poems to try by an enormous effort to transpose yourself into the strange conditions in which the world is such that a bearded thunderer *can* be the sky, a trident-holder can be all the seas, an enormous woman can be the earth – all these things which are quite meaningless to us. Through the nature of language, through the odd use of language, one is able – if, he says, you make superhuman efforts – to enter the minds of these monstrous beasts with whom the world began.

Vico rejects the Golden Age. He rejects it simply on the basis of his historical knowledge. He says: If you look at early poetry of any kind – he did not confine himself only to Greek and Roman poetry, but also used whatever he could find in the seventeenth century about Siamese, Peruvians and others – if you look at early art, and try to conceive in what kind of world this kind of thing could have made sense, you will realise that this world is extremely remote from ours; but only if you do this will you understand what these words truly mean.

This kind of investigation of language as holding within itself the history of culture is important because the history of things is, according to Vico, the history of the words which mean them. First you have the word *lex*, then you have the word *ilex*; you have *aquilex*, you have *legumen*, you have *legere* (it does not matter what words are taken).[3] By tracing the etymology of a word you trace the succession of visions of the world of which these words form intrinsic elements. So too, presumably, with religious rites, and dances, and stone monuments, and various types of worship, each of which can be understood only when viewed not simply as error or absurd fancies, or packs of lies: myths for Vico are not false

[3] NS 240: see TCE2 84/2.

statements about reality invented by lying priests in order to bamboozle a lot of unfortunate innocents, in order to hold them down, not a lot of lies produced by a lot of knaves in order to rule over a lot of fools, and then believed by a lot of fools who then inject them into further fools, which is Voltaire's theory of history – a kind of conspiracy by bad men in order to acquire power by establishing a doublethink society. Vico says that myths are a way of seeing the world, and only if you understand that mythological talk or a mythological vision is a peculiar kind of vision will you understand the kind of world out of which you yourself come. To understand oneself, which is Vico's whole purpose, is to understand the kind of succession of stages which must have been passed through in order to reach the state which we are in at present. Hence the emphasis on mythology and, for the first time, the doctrine that myths are not poetic inventions to amuse people, or lies by wicked priests or wicked rulers; nor forgotten, distorted stories about early strong men, promoted to the rank of gods: myths are ways of vision, the beginning of all art.

Art and religion are closely related, and these, in their turn, are closely related to words, to etymology, to gestures. First there are 'mute' gestures, pictures, hieroglyphs, ideograms: he begins to trace all kinds of periods of human history which he thinks that every 'Gentile nation' pursued. Only the Gentile nations do this, not the Jews; as a pious Christian he believed that the Jews were vouchsafed direct divine revelation; God told them the truth – what there was, and what to do. But the other peoples had to make do with somewhat more primitive weapons, and he begins with these *orribili bestioni*[4] – these monstrous beasts, half apes, who wander on the face of the earth, which is covered with an enormous forest. There is a clap of thunder. The savages experience terror. They have in them already a sense of awe, a sense of fear, a sense of something supernatural, of something greater than themselves commanding them. They can copulate promiscuously under the eye of heaven. They escape into the caves with

[4] NS 374.

their women, and there, in order to protect their women against others, chastity and the family and children begin. These heads of families become partners, these savage fathers combine with each other in order to defend themselves. A few (or perhaps many) weaker men who are pursued by stronger brutes escape into these fortified dwellings and subject themselves to the rule of the fathers in order to be protected, and in this way clients are created – slaves. Slaves accumulate; they labour for the fathers, and you have the heroic age, which according to him is cruel, avaricious and stern. In this heroic age marvellous poetry is produced in the form of the Homeric songs, which is intrinsic to this particular kind of primitive period. This magnificent heroic poetry could have been produced only in an early primitive stage, by such brutal, ferocious, greedy, disciplined men.

This is a brand new idea. During the Renaissance, and well after it into the eighteenth century, the general view was that there is such a thing as illimitable progress. First, there is crude culture, which yields poor art, and men are gradually making it better. The civilised poetry of the seventeenth century is clearly superior to the barbarous, at times vigorous and quite interesting, but more artless poetry of the ancients. There is also the theory of alternations, whereby there are good periods of culture and bad periods. The Greeks and Romans wrote good poetry, then there came the barbarism of the Middle Ages, and all was dark. Then we emerged from the Middle Ages, restored the classical world, and the old models inspired us again to produce elegant verse. All this kind of thing is for Vico wholly false. The kind of poetry which an age produces belongs to it and to it alone. The vigour, the barbarism, the splendour and magnificence, the particular vitality of the Homeric poems belongs uniquely to the savage society, or what he calls the heroic society, of which it is the natural expression.

Once the heroic society passes, other things may appear, but this kind of poetry will never reappear, at least not in that particular form. The heroic age passes because the clients begin extorting rights. These rights are yielded, which leads to the formation of laws; the laws are written down, specialists begin to interpret the

laws for those who have to use them. As a result of scholarship, prose begins, criticism begins, philosophy begins. Philosophy is very disruptive: the old principles on which the oligarchies stood are undermined by criticism; plutocracy begins, after that democracy. Once democracy begins, faith goes, religion, loyalty, piety go, riches increase, human beings become more individualistic, more selfish, they begin to pursue wealth, and gradually the solidarity of society decays, and there comes the 'second barbarism', in which, Vico says, 'men throng together in crowds just as before, but each is so surrounded by his own egoistic desires that they can no longer communicate with each other'.[5] They are, in the modern phrase, alienated from each other. When this stage is reached, one of three things happens. Either a more barbarous or vigorous tribe comes down from the mountains or forests and conquers the weak civilisation, very much as happened to Rome, of which he is of course thinking all the time; or else a dictator appears to reinvigorate the race by stopping the rot, by imposing his rule upon them, as Augustus did earlier; or else they do collapse – that is to say, the birth rate declines, decadence sets in, degeneration begins, the food supply is destroyed, and you go back to the very beginning. Once again bows and arrows, once again *orribili bestioni*, once again the caves, piety, faith, simplicity, and the whole cycle begins afresh.

This is Vico's version of history. It is not the orthodox Christian picture of either a continuous fall or a continuous rise towards some kind of Second Coming. It is a cyclical view, quite common among ancient historians. But what is important in it is the notion that all the phenomena of an age are connected with each other. He applies this brilliantly: there was an old legend according to which the Twelve Tables – early primitive Roman law – had been fetched by the Romans from the Athens of Solon. Vico says this is not conceivable. The cultural level of Solonian Athens was such that it could not have been comprehended by the kind of creatures

[5] NS 1106 (loose); the 'second barbarism' is not referred to by this name here.

who moved about in, let us say, Rome in the sixth century BC. He then quotes an expression in the Twelve Tables, for example *auctoritas*, which has no conceivable Greek equivalent.[6] Therefore, these kinds of fables about the law travelling from Athens to Rome, or of wise men being sent from early Rome to Athens to transcribe their laws, and bring them back to Italy, are clearly nonsense, are clearly legends, and this is established on the ground that if you understand a given culture, you know what it can, and what it cannot, produce. It is the same kind of argument as you would use, for example, in saying that Shakespeare could not have written his plays at the court of Ghengis Khan.

If you are asked what the evidence is for Hamlet's *not* having been written at the court of Genghis Khan, you do not even bother to produce it; you say that the kind of culture which surrounded Mongolian Khans in the thirteenth or fourteenth century was not of such a kind as to be likely to produce Elizabethan English, and you do not bother to investigate any further. The very notion of attribution, the notion that some things could only have been produced by, say, ancient Rome and by nowhere else; that certain things could only belong to the seventeenth century and not to the twelfth; that certain things could only have been said by people in a certain cultural condition and not in some other; everything upon which the attribution of works of art depends, everything upon which the periodisation of history depends; the whole notion of what is characteristic and uncharacteristic, typical and untypical, the whole notion of anachronism, whereby we immediately notice if somebody says something which does not fit, or does not harmonise with, the expression of a given age, is a foreign substance, and must be attributed to some other age – for instance, that it is not possible for a man of the age of Racine to talk like a man of the age of Kennedy – the whole notion of everything fitting in its place historically is due to this notion of cultural unity, a unity

[6] What about 'ἐξουσία' (*exousia*)?

which has its own style, which permits certain things to happen, and excludes certain others.

This is a very central notion, and derives from Vico's view of mythology, institutions and words as the proper key to the knowledge of the past. From this, in due course, grew the sciences of comparative anthropology, comparative philology, comparative sociology, comparative literature – comparative everything, conceived of in a chronological manner.

How do these things arise? How do they happen? They happen because Providence is at work. Providence for Vico is a very peculiar power. Vico is a Christian, and therefore he believes somehow that the movement from one stage to another cannot be caused by any natural factors. It is true that man transforms himself. This is the notion which Karl Marx inherited. It is true that the whole history of mankind is the history of human beings trying to improve themselves, trying to find a home in the world, trying to understand the world they live in, trying to communicate with other human beings, trying to express themselves by means of art, religion, other forms of creation. Art for Vico is expression. It is not a beautiful object which you simply contemplate and find to be agreeable or beautiful. Art is always a voice speaking. You truly understand a work of art only if you can transpose yourself, to some degree at any rate, into the mentality of the man who created it, and try to understand what it is that he is trying to express. That is what is meant by understanding. Understanding can only be of that which we have created, not necessarily I, not necessarily you, but a society, or a group, or humanity collectively.

The German philosopher Herder, who, so far as we know, had not read Vico when he wrote these things, was afterwards to use exactly the same arguments for trying to explain how 'natural' poetry is created – epics, legends, fables, songs, which are created by some kind of collective consciousness, and which other human beings can grasp only by somehow entering into the skins of the people who had originally created them, and feeling the world, and seeing it, with similar eyes. Vico tirelessly insists on the fact that it is only with the most superhuman effort, only with the most

terrible deliberate effort,[7] that one can enter into the minds of peoples utterly remote from us in time or space. Nevertheless, it *can* be done. He says:

> [I]n the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity […] there shines the eternal […] light of a truth […]: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations […], which, since men had made it, men could come to know.[8]

It is beyond our powers to enter into the imaginations of those first men, whose minds were not in the least abstract, refined or spiritualised, because they were entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by their passions, 'buried in the body';[9] nevertheless, if we make enough effort, we can. This is the whole point. Mythologies are in some sense historical records of past visions of life; art is this too; every nation goes through the same phases of birth, growth, an apex, old age, collapse, and this process can be traced through its art, through its institutions, through its language, through its myths, through all its general modes of expression.

This was not something likely to be clearly understood in his own time. In the case of the development of law, perhaps it was. Perhaps his disciple Emanuele Duni did explain this more clearly than his master. But the real source of this is different: the lawyers of the sixteenth century, because of the political struggles between the King of France and the nobles, began to try to discover exactly what it was that certain formulae in Roman law meant, in order to use them in the present. They delved into Roman law because some of them supposed that Roman law contained some eternal

[7] NS 338: 'a gran pena'.
[8] NS 331.
[9] ibid.

truths, and if only these could be rediscovered, if only the medieval accumulation, the perversions and distortions, could be removed, if only the monkish accumulation of nonsense could be scraped off, perhaps the original gold minted by these Roman lawyers could be found, and in that way shining eternal truths could be restored to their proper place. That was the ambition of those scholars who were trying to 'restore' antiquity, both in the Renaissance and before it.

The first consequence was this: that in trying to understand the meanings of some legal formula they found they could do that only by understanding the kind of life in which it was used, the kind of society in which it was relevant. And so, willy-nilly, they began a kind of historical reconstruction: these lawyers, without perhaps the slightest historical interest, began to try to understand how the Romans lived, in order to give some meaning to their legal formulae, and this – rather than in narrative history – is where the whole business of restoring the ancient world began, the whole task of trying to uncover, to dig up, hitherto concealed ancient forms of life, simply in order to illuminate what the meaning is of these Roman legal sentences.

That is how it began, and that is how it reached Vico, in all probability. But the paradox – the second consequence – was that, as they delved, as scholarship became more accurate, as they tried to remove the misinterpretations of later ages, as they tried to reproduce the pristine meaning of a given Roman lawyer, what he really meant by his words, two things happened. The first was that it became clear that Rome was very different from the modern world, that Roman law, so far from being a collection of eternal truths equally applicable in their day and in ours, sprang from a peculiar world, a Roman world, which was far from us, odd, unlike ours; and so the whole idea of historical oddity was gradually born – the idea that the more you delve into the past, the stranger it may become, not the more familiar; the more you discover, the more unlike the present it is shown to be, not the more like.

What Vico made of this was very startling. There is a theory of natural law, which the great lawyers certainly adhered to, beginning

in Aristotle and restated by Aquinas, held by people like Grotius and Pufendorf in the seventeenth century, namely that there are certain truths, certain great principles, which any human being, at any time and in any place, provided God has granted him a modicum of reason, can clearly see, such as that he must not kill, or that property is sacred, or that certain wars are just and others are not, or that one must not hurt other people beyond necessity – or whatever it may be.

For Vico this was absurd. The idea that these *orribili bestioni* – these semi-barbarous apes who flee into caves at the slightest peal of thunder – if you were suddenly to stop one and ask, 'What are natural laws?', could immediately reel off some catalogue of natural law supplied by Isidore of Seville, or Gratian, or Grotius; the notion that these early savages would be able to state some kind of basic principles which were true of all men at all times in all places – as Rousseau would say, graven upon human hearts in letters more lasting than brass[10] – this was obviously absurd. They did not know or use, however unconsciously, any of these propositions; the idea of general principles guiding human conduct was a very late and very sophisticated invention; and therefore the whole notion of natural law, which can be discovered anywhere, was for Vico a great absurdity.

Principles grow – if you wanted to know what law was, you must discover how it grows. If you want to know what human beings are, you must discover how they develop. If you want to know what poetry is, you must trace it through all its stages. If you want to know what language is, you must first of all see what gestures are like, and then what paintings or hieroglyphs are like, and then what spoken speech is like; and then you will discover that dancing comes before walking, or poetry before prose, speech before writing.

[10] IB alludes to Rousseau's *Du contrat social* (1762) 2. 12, where he speaks of a kind of law 'not graven on tablets of marble or brass, but on the hearts of the citizens […] I am speaking of morality, of custom, above all of public opinion.'

Similarly with social contract theories, upon which a lot of the legal and political theory of the seventeenth century was founded. In order to have such a thing as a social contract you must understand what a promise is; in order to understand what a promise is people must already have lived in a highly complicated and sophisticated society, in which alone such a thing as a promise or contract is intelligible. Therefore the idea that societies were created by a lot of wild men coming out of the woods and saying, 'I have thought of a good idea. Let us have a contract. Let us promise each other that we will not molest each other. Let us agree. If we set you up as sovereign, and we behave thus and thus, you will stop us; and if we do that, you will not stop us.' The idea that human beings, *orribili bestioni*, were able to behave as sophisticated persons behave is ridiculous.

Vico says this is the fault of the philosophers, who always assumed that these early men already possessed all the ripe and sophisticated wisdom of their own age, and the fault of patriots, whose national *boria* – arrogance – makes them suppose that their nation invented something a thousand years before some other nation, much in the way that, for example, under Nkrumah the Ghanaians claimed to have made the human alphabet, built the pyramids, discovered metals and generally started off human civilisation. This is the kind of thing which Vico protests against. Historicism and relativism are the two notions which he really sets afloat in a very large way. But these ideas were hardly intelligible in his own time.

Let me consider some of the implications of this doctrine. The first is that there is no such thing as fixed human nature. Human nature is a fluid stream which evolves and develops through time. Nothing is static. *Nascimento* – *natura* comes from *nascimento* – means growth, progress. Secondly, there is no such thing as the matchless wisdom of the ancients, there is no ancient natural law, there are not these sages before the Flood who knew everything. Consequently, when someone like the ancient historian Polybius says what a disaster it is for mankind that it had these lying priests, not philosophers, at its birth, and if only some wise philosophers

had started mankind off, all these terrible troubles which arise from ignorance and superstition might have been avoided, Vico replies that there could not have been philosophers. The idea that a wise philosopher like Plato might have occurred at any stage – that he might have lived not in the fourth century BC but in 1400 BC or 9400 BC – is absurd. When mankind began as *orribili bestioni* – primitive men, half animals – the kind of worship in which they indulged, the kind of huts they built, the kind of witch-doctors they obeyed were what they were. The idea that it is just bad luck that Descartes did not happen to be living in 2000 BC is an absurd misunderstanding of what can and what cannot be.

This proposition was something new to Vico's generation. If you read Spinoza, for example, who was after all an exceedingly gifted thinker, you find that he supposed that the political organisation of human beings was really something which could be solved by rational thought, and that all that was wrong was that people got it wrong before. They got it wrong in the ancient world, they got it wrong in the Middle Ages, with luck they might get it right in the seventeenth century, but they *might* have got it right in 2000 BC. It is just pure misfortune that they happened to have got the wrong answer to what political organisation should be.

For Vico this is a wild absurdity. People build their lives with what they have. When they are primitive, their lives are primitive. When they cannot write and cannot read, their culture takes particular forms: it produces splendid monuments of a certain kind on the one hand, and extremely cruel and primitive and bestial habits on the other. When the cruel and bestial and monstrous habits turn into civilised ones, men become polite, they become happy, they become kind, they become cultivated, they become understanding, but they cannot write magnificent poetry, epics will be dead, the magnificence of the barbaric age is gone, and there is a definite loss. Vico was the first thinker who was anti-progressive in the sense that he believed that every gain entails a loss, that the more civilisation there is, the more understanding, the more kindness, the more sweetness there is in human life, the less vigour, the less brutality, the less spontaneity; and therefore that certain

kinds of art, certain kinds of poetry, certain kinds of self-expression, which we admire in the Homeric poems, in *The Song of the Niebelungs* – in all these great national epics – can no longer be produced. Therefore we pay a price for evolving. The price may be worth paying, but the idea that human history cannot be a continuous progress, cannot even be an intermittent progress, for every new stage, although it gains something, loses something too – that central idea, which is not entirely agreeable for human beings to contemplate, we to some extent owe to Vico.

What were Vico's posthumous fortunes? In Naples he was a well-known local scholar. He had written a biography of the great soldier Carrafa; he wrote a certain number of funerary inscriptions for notable persons; he wrote a story of the Macchia conspiracy; he was a well-known local antiquary, and a well-known local professor of rhetoric, who delivered annual lectures at the University of Naples. He was a cripple, rather an irritable, irascible man, somewhat lonely, rather difficult; but he was a local notability. Outside Naples perhaps a few cognoscenti, perhaps the abbé Conti or Count Porcía, knew him in Venice; perhaps a few other people did; perhaps the editor of a French learned journal, or some learned men in Germany, knew what he was doing, but there were very few. In Naples they were quite proud of the *Scienza nuova*, but they did not understand its central notion. Nor did the foreigners do much better. The German philosopher Hamann sent for the *Scienza nuova* in 1777 because he thought 'scienza nuova' meant economics (which was the new science of 1777). When he received a copy of Vico's book, he could not understand a word of it, and sent it on to some of his disciples, saying it was all dark and tangled and he could not make it out. In 1787 Goethe appeared in Naples, and the lawyer Filangieri handed him a copy of Vico. He writes in *The Italian Journey*: 'How wonderful! – they brought me this one book by this old philosopher Vico, which they treat as a kind of Bible. It is nice to think that they should have a learned man of their own, rather like our Hamann. What wonderful visions of the future this man paints. What marvellous pictures of the future

felicity of mankind.'[11] But there is nothing about the future in Vico; there is nothing about the felicity of mankind. It is perfectly plain that Goethe did not read one single line of it.

In 1797 – it always seemed to happen at ten-year intervals – Herder read it in Weimar. He understood a little more. He realised that Vico was interested in the history of law, the history of institutions, but as he himself had already written down his very similar views by 1774, and only looked at this book in 1797, it is impossible to suppose that he plagiarised it. In 1807, the great Homeric scholar Wolff had Vico brought to his attention, and had it pointed out to him that Vico had already dissolved Homer (before Wolff had done so) into the general consciousness of the Greeks, had maintained that the author of the *Iliad* could not be the same as the author of the *Odyssey*, because one talks about North-Western Greece and the other about South-Eastern Greece. Wolff was very displeased: nobody likes to be anticipated.

Even more displeased was the historian Bathold Georg Niebuhr. When Leopardi brought to Niebuhr's attention in Rome the fact that Vico had treated early Roman law and the fragments of early Roman poetry as evidence of Roman social life and of Roman institutions, much in the same way as Niebuhr had treated them, Niebuhr refused to take the slightest notice, and never mentioned the name of Vico at all. Only Savigny afterwards, when he wrote a kind of memoir of his friend Niebuhr, who died in 1830, tried to apologise for Niebuhr's mysterious silence about his predecessor. He said, 'Vico's writings are like flashes of lightning; they do more to confuse than to illuminate the path of the traveller.'[12]

The man who really put Vico on the map was Michelet. It happened because Vincenzo Cuoco, a Neapolitan patriot of the 1790s who objected to French rule in Naples, tried to make of Vico a kind of Italian Burke who defended the local traditions of each

[11] Very loose. See *Italienische Reise*, 5 March 1787: *Goethes Werke*, vol. 31 (Weimar, 1904), 27–8. More literal translation at TCE2 141.

[12] Free: see TCE2 142.

culture and the right of cultures to self-determination, and tried to protect them, to defend them from the proposition that they ought to be transformed by some centralising, for instance Napoleonic, power. Cuoco tried to get various other Italian exiles to recommend the *New Science* to various eminent foreigners, and in this way it came into the hands of Maistre, de Gérando, Fauriel, and finally of Victor Cousin. Victor Cousin was a French philosopher who read absolutely everything, and got an Italian scholar to put it in the hands of the young Michelet. Michelet read it in 1824 and developed a condition of wild enthusiasm. Vico to him was the man who described man as making his own history against nature – as a self-transforming being. History was not made by kings, by generals, by abstract factors, by God, it was made by man struggling against nature. History was the endless enterprise of man creating his own history by his own efforts, and therefore able to understand the past because it was he who made it. In 1824 he wrote in his journal, 'Vico! Effort! Grandeur! The Golden Bough! Infernal Shades!'[13] Towards the end of his career, in 1869, he said, 'I had no master but Vico. His principle of living force, of *humanity creating itself*, made both my book and my teaching.'[14] He also wrote: 'All the giants of criticism' – Wolf, Creuzer, Görres, Montesquieu, Gans, Niebuhr – 'are already contained, with room to spare, in the little pandemonium of the *Scienza nuova*.'[15]

After Michelet celebrated him and translated him and popularised him, he was taken up in the nineteenth century. He influenced a certain number of persons. Quite a good book was published on him by an Englishman[16] in the late nineteenth century. He was read by various persons in the 1890s. Croce did a very great deal to popularise him by creating almost a kind of local industry in Naples, under Nicolini, of editions of and commentaries on Vico.

[13] Approximate: see TCE2 143/2.

[14] Jules Michelet, Preface to ***Histoire de France*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1869)**, 4, col. 2; trans. (without Michelet's italics) Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin in *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico* (Ithaca, New York, 1944).

[15] See TCE2 96/1, 144–5.

[16] Robert Flint, *Vico* (Philadelphia/Edinburgh, 1884).

But Croce interpreted him in his own fashion and to some extent distorted his meaning, and made him into a kind of Immanent Idealist. Enzo Paci makes him out to be an existentialist. Georges Sorel made him out to be a kind of anti-democratic élitist. Other people have read into Vico all kinds of other things. It is the fate of important thinkers that people read into them all kinds of things of their own, which they want to read into them. Interpretations of Vico today are many. Joyce used him in *Finnegans Wake*. Yeats was fascinated by him. Various other people read him, and yet the original Vico still remains unread, still remains to be interpreted.

Nevertheless, the importance of Vico, quite apart from the particular contributions he made to historical science and to the general self-understanding of man, which I have tried to indicate, is that he is the first voice to start what might be called a kind of Counter-Reformation. The great influence of science in the seventeenth century led to a doctrine which is still present with us, that all secrets – not only of inanimate nature, but also of man – will yield before the methods of the natural sciences. Vico was the first person to protest against this, and to distinguish the particular methods of 'empathetic' insight, or of understanding, used in the human sciences, in human studies, from those of the natural sciences. He was the first person to say that the natural sciences use only two methods – one that of description and generalisation, and the other the application of logic and mathematics, disciplines which we create ourselves – whereas the human sciences employ a somewhat different method (as well as using these others also). Scientific method verifies the material evidence, but in order to know and understand history you must know what it is like to be in love, you must know what it is like to have been a member of the Communist Party, you must know what it is like to have been under oppression, you must know what it is like to be poor. When a man says 'I know what it is to be poor', this is a different kind of knowing from knowing that one tree is taller than another, or knowing that there is no natural square root of two, or knowing that Hitler is dead, or knowing what water is composed of. This

kind of knowing Vico isolated and identified, and this is perhaps his largest single contribution to human knowledge in general.

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