ON READING VICO

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In accepting an invitation to participate in a recent celebration of Vico, I had originally suggested that I read a paper on the relationship of his work to the foundations of critical anthropology. This would have been a relatively simple (if anything about Vico can be said to be simple) and safe effort. By safe, I mean that I would have more or less gone along with the assumption, implicit in my own suggested topic, that Vico was, in certain determinate ways, an ancestor of the critical perspective in anthropology. However, in preparing for the event, I began asking myself a different, though related, sort of question. But before I deal with this question, I will briefly define what I mean by the tradition of critical anthropology and Vico's relation to it.

By critical anthropology, I mean the comparative, historical, and revolutionary perspective on contemporary Western civilization, impelled by certain conditions that have become acute under industrial monopoly capitalism. These are: socio-economic alienation and exploitation; imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism; the hypertrophy of state power, of bureaucratic and technocratic organization; the isolation and atomization of the person (and the concomitant growth of the "masses"); the degradation of the symbolic dimension of human experience; the loss of cultures and languages, the qualitative and quantitative shift in the character of war – all in all, what Vico might have recognized as a new barbarism. The positive task of critical anthropology is to help generate an alternate sense of human possibilities based on concrete cultural-historical inquiry, while interpreting and, where justified, supporting the multiplex reactions against these phenomena in our own society. Its method is dialectical, that is, it denies the Cartesian breach between subject and object, refuses to acknowledge the privileged position of the observer, understands the distortion involved in the gap between theory and practice (and is therefore political), rejects all mechanistic or reductionist explanations of the sociocultural process, and focuses on the contradictions in our society as a source of intentional revolutionary energy.

I would have traced the evolution of critical anthropology through the paradigmatic (not exclusive) figures – of Montaigne, Rousseau and Marx, identifying Rousseau, who was profoundly influenced by Montaigne, and who profoundly influenced Marx in turn, as the mediator.

I would have noted that in 1874 in *Anti-Duhring*, a work with which Marx was fully acquainted, and on which he was a partial collaborator, Engels wrote:

> Already in Rousseau, therefore, we find not only a sequence of ideas which corresponds exactly with the sequence developed in Marx's *Capital*, but that the correspondence extends also to details, Rousseau using a whole series of the same dialectical developments as Marx: processes which in their nature are antagonistic, contain a contradiction, are the transformation on one extreme into its opposite and finally as the kernel of the whole process, the negation of the negation. And though in 1754 Rousseau was not yet able to use the Hegelian jargon, he was certainly twenty-three years before Hegel was born deeply (involved) in the dialectics of contradiction [1].

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I might also have cited the recent book *From Rousseau to Lenin* by the Italian Marxist, Colletti [2] (a student of Gramasci, who was a Vico enthusiast), in which he ignores Vico and elaborates the connection between Rousseau and Marx, but takes Marx to task for not once acknowledging it. This, of course, is not the case, not only with reference to Engels' observation, but also because Marx, in opposition to Hegel, consciously grounded himself in the French revolutionary tradition right through 1870 and the Commune. In the latter context, I would have referred to both the relatively early *The German Ideology*, and the final *Ethnological Notebooks*, broken off at Marx's death, in order to explicate his continuous understanding of the breach between state and stateless societies, his concept of class, the division of labor, distinctions between primitives and peasants, definitions of exploitation, among other matters – all major sources for the anthropological critique of Western civilization, a perspective Marx shared with Rousseau.

Rousseau, I would have recalled, specifically acknowledges the influence of Montaigne throughout his work (he refers to Montaigne as his master) – beginning with the *First Discourse* in which he attacks the corrupt and elitist structure of the increasingly specialized arts and sciences, but not technology as such, and not the perpetually renewable, ancient forms of the common arts and dramas of humanity. Rousseau's references to Montaigne are maintained through the *Second Discourse*, the *Social Contract*, and *Emile*, to the *Confessions*, and *La Nouvelle Heloise*. But for at least one commentator, Dreano [3], the influence of Montaigne on Rousseau is so pervasive that it could hardly be acknowledged in full, for as Engels said of Marx's relation to Rousseau, the very sequence of ideas in work after work had already been anticipated in the *Essays*.

In turning to Montaigne, I would have considered him, in the words of Donald Frame [4] as seeking "Mankind in himself," or in Montaigne's own words, "Each man bears the entire form of Man's estate." Obviously, I would have interpreted the essay on Cannibals as an early, elaborate and systematic critique of civilization in a comparative historical, that is, anthropological perspective. But influence does not mean assimilation in the history of ideas, and, as Vico might instruct us, the history of ideas is not merely a logical academic sequence, but a reflection mediated by institutions. Thus I would have defined Montaigne as developing a vast anthropology of the self, which dovetails with his empathic effort to understand primitive society. For Montaigne, the man of the French Renaissance, all of human life is called into question. He regards himself dispassionately as a creature about which nothing can be taken for granted, as if he had just encountered himself in the Brazilian forest, or more to the point, on an island in the Caribbean.

As an aside, I might have mentioned the ramifying influence of that essay *On Cannibals* in particular – on Shakespeare, for example. As the Cuban poet and essayist, Roberto Fernandez Retamar tells us (and he is only one among many such non-European interpreters of The Tempest), Caliban was Shakespeare's anagram for Cannibal, in turn related to Carib; and *The Tempest* was, on one level, a microcosm of the colonial experience, the critical human confrontation, with all the actors represented. We are informed that one such character, Gonzalo, "who incarnates the Renaissance humanist, at one point, closely glosses entire lines from Florio's Montaigne" – originating in *On Cannibals*. And, claims Retamar, "Florio was not only a close personal friend of Shakespeare's but the copy of the translation that Shakespeare owned and annotated is still preserved" [5]. *Our* symbol, he says, is Caliban, and Cesaire has written an adaptation of *The Tempest* for the Black Theatre, on the same theme. Shakespeare was a consummate realist, but there is no doubt about where his sympathies lie, as the English author John Wain had already concluded in *The Living World of Shakespeare* [6].

Nonetheless, Montaigne does not socially contextualize his conclusions; if he examines the question of man, and even puts man into question, he has not systematically questioned history. But Montaigne's impersonal engagement becomes Rousseau's passion for humanity; Montaigne's communications become Rousseau's confessions. And Rousseau socially interprets his sense of civilizational crisis; man in question is always society in question. Hence his *Second Discourse* is the first effort at a general anthropology which can be called modern, and inevitably it is a critique. But Rousseau never abandons his self-examination which he, and we, can relate to the times. Whereas Vico writes about man as subject and object of the historical process, Rousseau, following Montaigne, *reveals* himself as both.

If Rousseau is, as Robespierre called him, the father of the French Revolution, he has already seen beyond it at the moment of bourgeois consolidation. That is where the real thrust of his criticism points – and it extends over the whole range of socio-economic phenomena. He defines the need for field work (missing in Vico), but only as a way of deepening the critical reflection on the crisis of civilization, and he sees the function of anthropology as the revolutionary scrutiny of his own society. And this would have brought me back to Marx's work, which of course coincides with the consolidation of modern imperialism, and the transition between mercantile and industrial capitalism. Even critical social contextualization of the question of man is no longer sufficient; critical observation is transformed into critical theory and revolutionary praxis. Marx ranges over the whole gamut of emerging disciplines, thinks anthropologically, in short, in order to document and discover the real socio-economic mechanisms of exploitation.

Marx is explicitly dialectical; the ironic paradoxes of Montaigne and the paradoxical arguments of Rousseau are now transformed, via Hegel, into a more formal systematics; but the breach between theory and practice is closed. Alienation is examined as a mass phenomenon; deformation is universal, and politics, not confession, is the issue. For Marx, biographies have become irrelevant; the only imperative is the reconstruction of society, the conscious creation of history and hence the actual *reinvention* of the human being.

I would then have reexamined briefly the schism between the academic and critical traditions in anthropology (Marx and Rousseau were, of course, not academicians), and turned to Vico, who himself had no high regard for the conventional academy. I would have made certain predictable observations that the *New Science* is an anthropology in subject and range, and in many of the processes it decodes or anticipates, and that it is "critical" in its historical, self-reflexive examination of civilization. But there being no determinate sequence mediated by a paradigmatic scholar, and moreover, there being no transformations of the type just traced linking Vico to the contemporary *critical* anthropological enterprise as such, I would consider him unrelated to its foundations. He emerges as a parallel, isolated, and remarkable instance of a similar (by no means identical) civilizational consciousness. And this is perhaps not Vico's responsibility. For, he has hardly been used and transformed by others in the "social sciences" (maybe as I shall intimate later on, he cannot be). Where he has been, as in "aesthetics," through the determinate, conscious mediation of Coleridge (who had, nonetheless, typically reached his "Vichian" conclusions before reading Vico), and through Coleridge to contemporary critics of the stature of Whalley and Bloom, he is alive and central to our concerns. Nonetheless, I would have drawn certain parallels between Rousseau and Vico (e.g., the latter's twin conceits of states and scholars), and Marx and Vico. And I could have compared unfavorably whatever is mechanical and reductive in Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* to Vico's principle that men can understand what men create, which *excludes* nature. Against Engels, I may even have quoted

Marx's single published reference to Vico (in *Capital*) which refers to Vico's famous principle and consequently gives priority to the study of historical rather than "natural technology" because the former reveals social relations and "the mental conceptions that flow from them" [7]. What the *latter* reveals, Marx does not say. But I still would have concluded that Vico's contribution to critical anthropology is marginal – with perhaps one complex exception – his unprecedented understanding of the primitive character of poetic language ultimately in conflict with the "higher" development of civilization, which Vico himself considered his single, most struggled for achievement.

Who, then, is Vico?

As one reflects on the more recent commentaries on Vico's work available in English, their contradictory, yet *uniformly reverential* character stands out, and perhaps justifies a commentary of its own. I am not overlooking here the fact that Rousseau and Marx, among many major figures in the history of ideas, have elicited conflicting interpretations, but these have largely arisen from a clearly *pro* or *contra* position: to be severely antagonistic to an author is to define one's own counter-tradition. Yet the differences to which I refer do not seem to be artificial counters in a scholar's game (a pastime which Vico deplored); they are neither frivolous nor blindly reflexive, in the sense that one position *mechanically* determines the other. They represent, rather, impressive, sometimes passionate differences of opinion and, of course, the relative newness of the subject may have something to do with the response that it excites. But there is more to it than that. Some of Vico's commentators try to lose themselves in his immensity; others try to weave him into the texture of their lives, that is, into their ultimate epistemological and ontological positions.

Perhaps there is a parallel with Rousseau here – if one recalls Boswell's fierce argument with the skeptical Johnson. Nor do the responses to Marx and Freud prefigure the kind (not to speak of the dimensions) of the reaction I have in mind. Both Marx and Freud were involved in praxis, and their doctrines were fated to become ideologies. This was not the case with Vico, who constructed a general theory of history as human praxis, but not a concrete theory of political, or even therapeutic, action. There is no way that we can put Vico into practice; he neither commands any given action, nor seriously implies any resolution – one can, with Vico, reflect endlessly on the crises of civilization, but one is not impelled to act, or even to adopt a specific position.

This is not to say that Vico is a cult figure, but rather that he has certain qualities to which specialized academics, and positivistically conditioned (even if against their better instincts) scholars may turn in relief, no matter how they interpret, or better, *misinterpret* him, in the decisive sense of the latter term (that is, in Paul de Man's sense) that I shall be adopting. Vico, in short, remains a presence; the work and the man are one, although the man himself, as I shall argue, is divided, and so, therefore, is the work. Vico presents us with a certain kind of vision – in the "guise" of scholarship – using the term "guise" as he does – as a "modification" of the human mind appropriate to the time. And we are freed to read him – as we would the clouds in the sky, or the entrails of birds – while searching for a cosmology, even a cosmography in which to ground ourselves in this disenchanted century.

But before pursuing this matter further, it will be useful to review some of the contradictions to which I have already referred, as evident in the standard symposium volume available in English. Professor Bidney, for example, allies Vico with what he takes to be Rousseau's notion of the fall of man in civilization [8]. Professor Wells argues that Vico viewed human beings in a state of nature as "brutal egoists," there being no trace in Vico of Herder's or Rousseau's ideas on the primitive [9]; Professor Paci refers sympathetically to Vico's notion of secondary primitivism as Rousseauan; "For him (Rousseau) the primitive is the original and positive man who is reborn in us in spite of

the corruption of civilization" [10]; Professor Hampshire is certain that Vico's sympathies are all with the primitive, the "childhood of humanity" as he puts it, and with the primitive in all of us [11]; Professor Cotroneo is equally adamant in arguing the opposite; for Vico, presumably following the French Renaissance legal scholar Jean Bodin more closely than he has acknowledged, "primitive life is without virtue" [12]; and Professor Leach relates Vico to Rousseau on the one hand, and Hobbes on the other; Vico "shares Rousseau's ideas about the imaginative capacities of natural man," but is with Hobbes on the role of institutions in "curbing the aggressive acquisitiveness of human individuals" [13].

Each of these interpretations, which differ subtly in their assessment of Rousseau or Hobbes, even when the commentators otherwise broadly agree, is sufficiently documented from the *New Science* or through an acknowledged exegete.

Turning now to a broader series of characterizations, one finds that the implications of Vico's anti-Cartesianism [14] make it possible for Professor Edie to claim him as an existentialist [15]; Professor Paci as a precursor of structuralist phenomenology (a linkage which Levi-Strauss has declared impermissable) [16]; and Professor Leach as a structuralist in the comprehensive mode of Levi-Strauss, that is, as one who conceives a common structure in external nature, the nature of man, and in culture, the data of which are defined as a nature-mediating and socially-controlling language [17]. Vico's famous statement about the modifications of the human mind reflecting the principles of civilization is also deployed here as a proto-structuralist argument.

But, according to Pompa [18], among others, these modifications of the human mind cannot represent a cultural replication, or transformation of natural forms. Vico is referring to *human* history and *human* nature, to differential human natures in each succeeding historical phase and, finally, to the identity between man as historical agent and as historian. As Pompa puts it [19]; "The modifications to which Vico refers include both the formal conditions of human development, together with the basic facts about humanity contained, on the one hand, in the related theories of fallen man and absolute common sense, and, on the other, in Vico's genetic thesis . . . history is made possible by the exercise of self-reflection." That self-reflection can only be by and of man as a historical subject; it is not *supposed to be* a metaphysical or deductive process. Vico's basic anthropological principle that humanity knows only what it creates, and thus can know history, but not nature assumes (see Isaiah Berlin [20]) a radical discontinuity between nature and culture, our potential knowledge of each, and perhaps, between our potential capacity to master one rather than the other. This is, of course, the opposite of the continuity inherent in the character of ultimate reality generic to comprehensive structuralism, which assumes an isomorphic reduction of cultural-historical to natural process, while postulating a merely formal truth behind what it describes as the illusion of human meaning. Vico's opposition to Spinozan determinism is also pertinent here; as if in direct response to the words of Spinoza, he writes [21]:

> Now, as geometry (Vico understood mathematics as a human creation and not as a reflection of ultimate reality – S.D.) when it constructs the world of reality out of its elements, or contemplates that world, is creating it for itself, just so does our science create for itself the world of nations, but with a reality greater by just so much as the institutions having to do with human affairs are more real than points, lines, surfaces, and figures are.

To Vico, the structuralist penchant for mathematizing the human equation would have to reflect an inferior order of reality [22].

These typical internal and external contradictions in conceptualizing Vico are, as I have noted, readily compounded. Vico is said, to one degree or another, through one line of reasoning or another, to prefigure Hegel, Kant, Comte, Durkheim, Marx, and Cassirer, among

others. (I have not yet found the psychoanalytic prototype, but I am sure the point can be easily made on the level of mythological analysis. The modifications of the human mind can also be incarnated in oedipal complexes and archetypes.)

Yet there is one perspective which clarifies the occasion for these contradictions, even in a certain sense, integrates them, namely, the *New Science* understood as an epic poem, or *almost* an epic poem, *whose subject is the birth, death, and rebirth of culture*. The armature of this cycle is the struggle between philosophical reason (or conceptual universals) and poetic language (or perceptual cognition), between poetry and prose, between humanity in its "origins", and humanity in its "maturity", between the two sides of the historical self. "Imagination," writes Vico, "is more robust in proportion as reasoning power is weak." The Plato of the *Republic*, with its parallel distinction between the rational and the poetic, comes to mind at once. And it is just here that Vico's lifelong insistence on his Platonism is most understandable. Vico is explicit:

> By the very nature of poetry it is impossible for anyone to be at the same time a sublime poet and a sublime metaphysician for metaphysics abstracts the mind from the senses, and the poetic faculty must submerge the whole mind in the senses. Metaphysics *moves up* to universals, and the poetic faculty must *plunge deep* into particulars [23].

But the Republic can be read as a systematic effort to enthrone philosophical reason; it is immobile, final, the social structure and culture of reason itself which, segregated from the affective and the instrumental, imperializes, while distorting, cognition; it is a Utopia projected out of Plato's version of the Greek cycle of civilizational development. In that structure (which is an ideal reflection of archaic society) the universal is opposed to the particular, knowledge to consciousness, the rational to the imaginative; each set represents a paired opposition in the class structure of the *Republic*, class in both the socio-economic and conceptual-categorical senses of the term. Thus Plato seems to have achieved what Vico assumes, just as Vico has achieved in his exploration of poetic cognition what Plato implies.

In fact, Vico [24] is willing to credit all of the "useful," "necessary," "convenient," and most of the "pleasurable" arts to the poetic centuries before the philosophers "those old men of the nations came, and founded the world of the sciences thereby making humanity complete" [25]. He thus implies a distinction between the sciences and "mere" technology which is of the same order as that between the universal and the particular, knowledge and certainty [26], and quite remarkably, between the rational and the poetic. For the useful arts, he tells us, are "nothing but imitators of Nature," and in a certain way, "real" poems (made not of words but of things, the bracketed editoral comment affirms). *A real poem is, then, a particular, determined, created object.* This is a very beautiful way to conceive it, but Vico is nowhere more Platonic than he is here, or more a philosopher prepared "to live in the Republic" [27]. For Plato relegates the majority of men to living among, imitating and, only in that sense, *creating* without true knowledge (Vico's *Scienzia*), their particular reflections of universal forms as useful objects. The poets, however, must either be put in their place, or exiled, because, among other shortcomings, they merely imitate the imitators. They are creators of words, not even of things, and are, therefore, three times removed from the truth accessible to philosophical reason.

Would the *Republic*, then, have represented Vico's implicit idea of a society released from the civilizational cycle, because it crystallizes the hierarchical interpretation of human nature that he shares with Plato? There is striking evidence for this in the "Practic of the New Science" which Vico had originally intended to supplement his conclusions to that work, and later suppressed.

In the "Practic", Vico refers to the whole of the *New Science* as a *contemplative* effort, promising "no help to preventing the ruin of nations in decay." But he is now to conclude

on an "active" note [28]. That "action" consists in "wise men and princes of the commonwealths" contemplating the "course the nations run," and recalling people to "their perfect state" [29] by teaching the young "how to descend from the world of God and of minds into the world of nature (and) . . . the world of nations" [30]. Further, "the men who have neither counsel nor virtue of their own are the matter which is the body of the world of nations, in respect of matter's property of being formless" [31]. But, "on the other hand, those who are the form and mind of the world of nations, in respect of form's property of bringing perfection, are the men who can *counsel* and defend themselves and others (Plato's guardians and auxiliaries – S.D.), and these are the wise and the strong" [32]. These are also considered by Vico the "active." "diligent," "grave," and "luminous," but above all "indivisible" men who "in every profession are engaged . . . with all propriety" – in [their] own crafts – those (who have achieved) "the property of being itself" (and) . . . "each one fulfilling the duties of his own order cooperate toward the harmony and beauty of the commonwealths." This civilized division of labor is, of course, Plato's definition of Justice, which Vico also agrees must be secured by moderation, religion, law, and force of arms. That, he says, is the history of nations and "the spirit of this entire work" [33]. And he concludes the Practic by stating that the youths must be taught the providential law, on which the *New Science* is based, namely, that "the nations are secure and flourish in felicity so long as the body in them serves and the mind commands."

Is Vico's notion, then, that Man can understand what he makes nuanced in a direction rather different from what we might prefer to assume? Does he mean, ultimately, that any man can become a poet of words and things (primitive man is said to be a poet *by nature*, and the language of the vulgar, the peasants, for example, still reflects the original poetic nature), but only a few men can understand what men make? [34].

In Plato, of course, that is to be achieved by individuals of special endowment after arduous training, who eventually come to understand the relationship between the conceptualized universal forms and their particular manifestations. This seems central to what Vico means by science, or knowledge, perhaps even by causal analysis. He has, after all, written: "the heroic language is a language of similies, images, and comparisons born of the lack of *genera* and *species* which are necessary for the definition of things" [35]. Can this be taken to mean that if one classifies a thing properly one comprehends it as a reflection of a divine form, which is also its cause? [36]. But I shall be returning to this point.

Elsewhere, Vico tells us [37] ". . . poetic sentences are formed by feelings of passion and emotion, whereas philosophic sentences are formed by reflection and reason. The more the latter rise toward universals [39], the closer they approach truth; the more the former descend to particulars, the more certain (that is, more contingent and particular – S.D.) they become." And ". . . the minds of the first men of the gentile world took things one at a time, being in this respect little better than the minds of beasts, for which each new sensation cancels out the last one (which is the cause of their being unable to compare and reason discursively)" [39]. He continues "abstract sentences are the work of philosophers, because they contain universals" [40]. And he concludes that sentence with a stunning and accurate phrase: "and reflections on the passions are the work of false and frigid poets (repeated in 825 – pace Wordsworth.)"

Is Vico referring to himself here, demanding that a poet be a poet and nothing else? Certainly few Western scholars have reflected so comprehensively on the language of poetry, which Vico repeatedly defines as the language of the passions. At the same time, he reminds us that "that heroism of virtue which realizes its highest idea belongs to philosophy and not to poetry" [4]. Moreover, "maxims of life – as being general (are) the sentences of

philosophers." And is not this whole higher-lower polarity a sanction for the governance of most men by a few? And is this what Vico means, at least in part, when he states in his conclusion: "the world is always governed by those who are naturally fittest" [42].

Correlatively, it is possible to understand Vico's double demystification of Homer, as a philosopher [43] and as a particular historical figure [44], his identification of Homer as the Greek people [45] themselves, singing their history as it appeared to them, in their corrupt heroic age, through their blind, impoverished *rhapsodes* (who were vulgar men – [46], as a further sanction of the position of ordinary people in Plato's *Republic*. "There is a complete absence of philosophy in Homer, says Vico, beginning his argument, ". . . he may have been quite simply a man of the people" [47]. If Homer is dangerous, the people are dangerous; "Homer is no stupid founder of Greek civility," but hastens the natural course of human institutions to its inevitably corrupt climax [48]. Homer "made men of Gods and Gods of men," [49], (which is precisely why Plato will not tolerate him in the *Republic* – S.D.). Of course, Vico's praise of Homer, the "most sublime" of poets, is virtually a hymn to the Greek people, but it should be remembered that Plato also bowed down before the poets before exiling them [50]. Paradoxically, Vico regards poetry itself as a sign of the *poverty* of language, but it is a paradox that should now be clear.

Is Vico, then, debating his own nature, that modification of his mind which reflects what we can now call the eternal struggle in the ideal eternal history? And is the *New Science* not the dynamic, historical complement of the *Republic*, a hidden tribute by Vico to his "divine Plato," whose influence he continuously acknowledges, but about which he is reticent in detail? The notion of complementarity seems appropriate when we recall that Vico does what Plato does not; he explores the lives of ordinary people, their language, myths, poetry, histories, families, useful objects, their particular and contingent character. In the *Republic*, of course, the social imperatives and modes of cognition of the guardians serve as the organizing principle. But Vico does not say this; he is silent on Plato's specific estimation of and program for the humanity that the latter has politically divided between philosophy and poetry. But he does maintain (is it a dynamic Vichian version of the parable of the cave?) that "It is true that men have themselves made the world of nations (and we took this as the first incontestable principle of our science . . .) but this world without doubt has issued from a mind often diverse, at times quite contrary, and always superior to the particular ends that men had proposed to themselves; which narrow ends, made means to serve wide ends, it has always employed to preserve the human race upon this earth" [51].

This is not to claim that Vico was a Platonist – no thinker of consequence is ever lost in the shadow of another. Indeed, it is to ameliorate the anxiety of influence – to adopt Harold Bloom's phrase with reference to the ancestral relationship of poets – that a certain silence may intervene between an earlier and later thinker. Be that as it may, I have brought up the tension between Plato and Vico because it seems to be a source of the poetic energy of the work, reinforcing the tension between philosophic and poetic language, a tension which is not merely abstract, but which is felt by Vico himself, and also serves as an aspect of his historical method: the capacity of reflective human beings in an age of reason to explore the modifications of the human mind, to identify with the other.

Pursuing this paradox further, a number of observations can be made about the poetic character of the *New Science*, or Metaphysics, as Vico refers to it, apart from its major preoccupation with the nature of poetic language itself. (Vico designates ancient Roman law as a "serious poem," indicating that, in his own judgment, a prosaic work can be interpreted as a poem because its language is that of "poetic wisdom"). In Vico's view, all primitive people

are natural, or sublime poets (reflected also in the language of the vulgar, including the peasants); conversely, it is fair for us to assume that all strong poets have a substantially primitive nature [52]; the primacy of poetry is both ontogenetic and phylogenetic. The origins of language – its metaphorical, connotative, associative, and yet concrete character, are in poetry. Myths are imaginative, not abstract, universals, the poetic personification of the history of primitive and archaic humanity. The myths are, in fact, their history, honestly told, under the stimulus of fear and because reflection which can lead to lying is absent, but limited by the supposed primitive incapacity to abstract principles from a projected, imagined reality. The childhood of the species is analogous to the childhood of the person (hence the principle of the modification of the mind – S.D.). Vico sums this up as follows:

> But the nature of our civilized minds is so detached from the senses, even in the vulgar, by abstractions corresponding too all the abstract terms our languages abound in, and so refined by the art of writing and, as it were, spiritualized by the use of numbers, because even the vulgar know how to reckon, that it is naturally beyond our power to form the vast image of this mistress called "sympathetic nature." Men shape the phrase with their lips but have nothing in their minds, for what they have in mind is falsehood, which is nothing; and their imagination no longer avails to form a vast, false image. It is equally beyond our power to enter into the vast imagination of these first men, whose minds were not in the least abstract, refined or spiritual [53], because they were entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, buried in the body . . . we can scarcely understand, still less imagine, how these first men thought who founded gentile humanity [54]. (But is this not the major claim of the New Science? – S.D.)

Now this is a remarkable, if overstated, insight, overstated because Vico insists on pejoratively assimilating all authentic abstractions to Platonic abstractions [55] (see Diamond [56]) while flirting with the notion of primitive incapacity, although it could be argued that all he means here is that the "order of ideas follow the order of institutions." Nonetheless, the passage quoted deserves comparison with Boas' conclusion that:

> Primitive man, when conversing with his fellow man, is not in the habit of discussing abstract ideas . . . Discourses on qualities without connection with the object to which the qualities belong, or of activities or states disconnected from the idea of the actor or the subject being in a certain state, will hardly occur in primitive speech. Thus the Indian will not speak of goodness as such, although he may very well speak of the goodness of a person. He will not refer to the power of seeing without designating an individual who has such power. Thus it happens that in languages in which the idea of possession is expressed by elements subordinated to nouns, all abstract terms appear always with possessive elements, and thus reach abstract forms strictly corresponding to the abstract forms of our modern languages . . . (and further) if we want to form a correct judgment we ought to bear in mind that our European languages have been moulded to a great extent by the abstract thought of philosophers. Terms like "essence, substance, existence, idea, reality," many of which are now commonly used, are by origin artificial devices for expressing the results of abstract thought. In this way, they would resemble the artificial, unidiomatic abstract terms that may be found in primitive languages [57].

Paul Radin, among many others, has made similar "Vichian" observations, and my own field experiences [58] help confirm the point. For example,

> "the Anaguta of the High Nigerian Plateau, never count in the abstract . . . only with reference to concrete things or people; the numerals change form according to the classes of objects being counted (Vico has actually implied this [59], but are not grammatically concordant with them. Yet the Anaguta are fully capable of grasping numbers unrelated to particular objects. But they do not deify or reify number; there is no occasion for doing so in their society, and the idea seems meaningless to them . . . similarly, in explaining the meaning of a proverb, a concrete context is always presented, for the abstract idea is regarded as inconclusive.

Vico's equation of the primitive and the poetic is confirmed in other aspects, by Professor Jeff Opland, on the basis of his significant field studies among the Xhosa speaking Bantu of South Africa. In an article in the *Journal of the Modern Language Association* [60], Opland begins his argument by quoting Archie Mafeje, "one of the best of the contemporary tribal poets," to the effect that "Social Anthropologists as shown by Schapera's recent publication on *Praise Poems of Tswana Chiefs* do not seem to have yet grasped fully the significance of the institution of bards both in traditional and modern society." Opland focuses on the

"*Imbongi*," who composes his poetry when he is singing it. ". . . giving spontaneous vent to his feelings in an inspired *izibongo*, hair raising in its emotional impact . . . he struck dramatic poses . . . gone was the mild bespectacled butcher . . . he was completely transformed . . . the bare words alone cannot capture the total impression" (Compare with Vico's references to the original language, or poetry, of the body, that is, the dance – S.D.).

Opland epitomizes his findings as follows:

> The free ability to improvise is demonstrated also in song . . . But for our present purposes we must note the general capacity to improvise poetry that provides a foundation upon which the future *Imbongi* builds. Only a few men will go on to become *Imbongi* – and when they do their craft will develop the art of their poetry, but the connection between the lay poet and *Imbongi* is clear: *the Imbongi is, in essence merely a tribesman particularly gifted in spontaneous poetic expression . . . (but) every man is a (poetic) improvisor.*

Vico's insights in this area are formidable; he is more than justified in his claims to a major achievement. But it is equally important to note that Vico's ambivalence about poetic language is reflected in the text of the *New Science* itself. It may be said to be "poetic," as does Professor Cambon [61] who refers to Vico's "charged prose," "vivid axiomatic insights," "corollaries of rushing eloquence," "all things seen and actions felt which stand to their generating axioms as the movements of a Beethoven symphony stand to the initial sharp statement of their themes. Vico, like Dante thinks in concrete terms – and the *physical world is never far from his focus* (a certain sign of primitiveness, according to Vico – S.D.). Vico does not talk about the origin, development, and crisis of civilization; he makes us see the crucial scenes (through his "keen powers of sensuous perception" [62]) – and imaginatively participate in the choral action, even while taking his bearings in the vastest perspective he can afford."

So that is Vico's language. More properly, it may be regarded as more rhetorical than poetic. But, in any case, it is at variance with his definition of the *New Science* as a metaphysics, and himself, therefore, as a metaphysician reasoning in an orderly, clear, and dispassionate manner, which he defines as the *sine qua non* of philosophical discourse. Moreover, there is, as Professor Fisch has noted, a paucity of empirical argument in the work, despite Vico's tribute to Francis Bacon, one of Vico's "four authors." Vico's argument is, rather, *axiomatic, interpretive*, depending upon his aesthetic capacity to visualize and penetrate what Baudelaire was to call the "forest of symbols," on the one hand, and the "common experience of humanity" on the other. Indeed, the common principles of humanity in which the *New Science* is rooted are religion, marriage, and burial. Since these institutions exist everywhere, in one guise or another, and since "both vulgar and philosophic wisdom make them the rule of social life," they must represent "the bounds of human reason." "And let him who would transgress them beware, lest he transgress all humanity," concludes Vico [63]. This is an argument, and a very good one, but it is circular, and not at all analytic. It is this circularity which Vico implicitly denies throughout his work, in his efforts to place himself essentially beyond challenge.

For above all, it is Vico's vision which welds the *New Science* into a certain kind of poem. This vision is "poetic" because it is final, and perfect so far as the author is concerned, despite possible lack of evidence, or specific historical deviation. It is analogous to the vision of reality that a poet creates for himself, it inheres in his language; he *knows* it is true. For Vico, the work has the form and force of a revelation, the particular and the universal, the *verum* and the *certum* fuse. But Vico denies the reality of the creative synthesis, wherein the particular becomes, so to speak, its own universal.

Like the Christian and the primitive, Vico is fascinated by the infinite metaphor and endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, the occasion for the plurifunctional ritual dramas of humanity. This cycle has little to do with

Spencerian spirals, Hegelian or Marxist dialectics, Toynbean or Spenglerian cycles of civilizational decline (except as each of these, in its own way, may be traceable to the same elemental rhythm). But there is no Spenglerian despair in Vico; no faith in any Hegelian, illimitable catalysis of reason, no Marxist theory or imperative of action. There is only certainty about the character of the universal, recurrent historical drama [64].

Vico's three basic institutions – marriage, burial, and religion, are readily translatable into the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. This personal-social cycle finds its analogy in the course every nation must run as it develops, matures, declines, and falls [65], and is extended to the ideal eternal history which would be repeated "even if infinite worlds were born from time to time through eternity" [66]. Vico treats us to a series of parallel, triadic developments: from the age of gods, through the age of heroes, to the age of reason; from the primitive through the heroic to the rational nature; from divine law (and custom) through the heroic law of force, to human law dictated by reason; and so on [67]. Similarly, the order of institutions begins in the forest, and ends in the academies, as humanity moves from felt necessity to madness and dissolution. This dissolution is also defined as a "barbarism of reflection," more inhuman than the original barbarism of the senses, in the time of the birth of language. The latter was a "generous savagery," but the former is base. Under providence, we are finally assured, a revolutionary barbarism sets in, literally a return to "the primitive simplicity of the first world of peoples" and humanity is again religious, truthful, and faithful [68]. Croce, for one, has tried to invest this return with the familiar Marxist dialectical meaning, but I would interpret it as more akin to the rise of the monastic movement in North Africa as a fallout from Imperial Rome.

History, then, for Vico is a metaphor for death and resurrection; all history seems to become sacred history. In the ascription of Professor Fisch (following Schiller) – "the history of the world is the last judgment." In this sense, history is meaningless for Vico; all time is contemporary, or rather, temporality is an illusion.

But there is more to be said. Vico's argument is, at the same time, almost "poetic" in method, if theological in character. It deals with the dynamics of ambivalent relationships (in the banal form of unintended consequences), so that "Men mean to gratify their bestial lust and abandon their offspring, and they inaugurate the chastity of marriage from which the families arise. The fathers mean to exercise without restraint their paternal power over their clients, and they subject them to the civil powers from which the cities arise. The reigning orders of nobles mean to abuse their lordly freedom over the plebians, and they are obliged to submit to the laws that establish popular liberties. The monarchs mean to strengthen their own positions by debasing their subjects . . . and they dispose them to endure slavery at the hands of stronger nations." And so on, until "the remnants flee from safety to the wilderness . . . (and) . . . like the phoenix rise again" [69].

Thus divine intention ("this world without doubt has issued from a mind . . . always superior to the particular ends that men had proposed to themselves") and human result are assimilated to a unity that only "providence" comprehends and generates. Yet men are said by Vico to be free; what they do they do by intelligence, "by choice, not by chance": for choice is distinguished from chance on the basis of the results of their acting being "perpetually the same" [71]. It is hard to determine what Vico means here except that men make their histories over and over again, in an endless diversity of forms, or "modes", with comparable functions, or "substances" in accordance with a providential impulse that they can never *fully* understand (although philosophic reason may approximate an understanding at the apex of a civilizational cycle.) The movement of the cycle itself is clarified further, according to

Pompa [71], who interprets Vico's argument to mean that "as soon as man has acquired the power to understand the nature of things," that is, the power of reason, the object of understanding is demystified, including the belief in a "provident deity," and civilization, which is alien to man's fallen nature, begins to collapse; history ends because reason can never be a condition of history.

Thus reason is at the summit of the historical experience which is a succession of human natures, and also the signal of its decline, leading to the primitive, "irrational" revival. Reason and poetry are differentiated but inseparably united in the eternal cycle; they are irreconcilable, perpetually destroying each other, perpetually rejoined. This sort of dialectic does not sensibly recall either Hegel or Marx, but suggests a Chinese subtlety, while it moves in the direction of Yeats and Blake without achieving what each understood: that poetic language is an *unanalyzable* unity of contrarieties. To quote from Shakespeare's *Phoenix and the Turtle*, perhaps the most unsparing expression of this ambivalence in English:

> Property was thus appalled
> That the self was not the same;
> Single nature's double name
> Neither two nor one was called.
>
> Reason in itself confounded,
> Saw division grow together
> To themselves yet either neither
> Simple were so well compounded
>
> That it cried "How true a twain
> Seemeth this concordant one!
> Love hath reason, reason none,
> If what parts can so remain.

If this *New Science* has the characteristics of a poem, it is, nevertheless, a failed poem because it betrays its own nature in the service of a presumably demystifying rationality, which it accepts as superior to itself, and fails to honor, or linguistically sustain, its own ambivalence. I refer here not to the ambivalence about poetic language, but the ambivalence *of* poetic language. Vico contaminates his magnificent concern with the lives of ordinary people – their languages, myths, histories, families, useful objects, and their particular and contingent character in the name of a universal science, that is, a hierarchical metaphysics. Because the *New Science* remains divided between poetry and science, and denies the integrity of poetic ambivalence, it may have generated, to use Harold Bloom's conceit, a "massive map of misreading" but it has not generated a single, strong, unified interpretation, or better, misinterpretation. Therefore, Vico may be adopted as an ancestor, but he has no natural heirs.

NOTES

1 F. Engels, *Anti-Duhring* (New York: International Publishers, 1939) pp. 153–154.
2 L. Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).
3 M. Dreano, *La Renommée de Montaigne en France au XVIII siècle* (Paris: Angers, 1952) p. 336ff.
4 D. Frame, *Montaigne's Essays and Selected Writings: A Bilingual Edition* (New York: St. Martins, 1968).
5 R.F. Retamar, "Caliban: Notes Towards a Discussion of Culture in Our America", *The Massachusetts Review*, Winter-Spring, 1974, p. 14.
6 J. Wain, quoted in "Caliban" by Retamar.
7 K. Marx, *Capital, Vol. I* (New York, International Publishers, 1967) p. 372.
8 D. Bidney, "Vico's New Science of Myth," in *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1969) p. 279ff. Hereafter referred to as *G.V. Symposium*.
9 G.A. Wells, "Vico and Herder" in *G.V. Symposium*, p. 94.
10 E. Paci, "Vico and Cassirer" in *G.V. Symposium*.
11 S. Hampshire, "Vico and the Contemporary Philosophy of Language" in *G.V. Symposium*, p. 480.
12 G. Controneo, "A Renaissance Source of the *Scienza nuova*: Jean Bodin's *Methodus*", in *G.V. Symposium*.
13 E. Leach, "Vico and Levi-Strauss on the Origins of Humanity," in *G.V. Symposium*, p. 309ff.
14 That is, his grasp of the radically metaphorical nature of language, understanding of the self as both subject and object of history, and so on.
15 J.M. Edie, "Vico and Existential Philosophy," in *G.V. Symposium*, p. 483ff.
16 E. Paci, "Vico and Cassirer," in *G.V. Symposium*, p. 497.
17 E. Leach, "Vico and Levi-Strauss on the Origins of Humanity," in *G.V. Symposium*, p. 317.
18 L. Pompa, *Vico: A Study of the New Science* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975) p. 156ff.
19 Ibid., p. 169.
20 I. Berlin, "A Note on Vico's Concept of Knowledge," in *G.V. Symposium*, p. 371, *inter alia*.

21 G. Vico, *The New Science*, Bergin and Fisch, editors (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968) paragraph 349. All references to *The New Science* are made to the paragraph.
22 For a fuller discussion of the connection between Levi-Strauss and Spinoza, see Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1974) p. 322.
23 G. Vico, *The New Science*, 821. For a discussion of the distinction between philosophical (Platonic) and poetic language see Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive*, p. 92ff.
24 G. Vico, *The New Science*, 217.
25 Ibid., 498.
26 Platos contrast between knowledge and opinion, if we interpret opinion as merely native opinion about apparent "facts" of immediate experience, is precisely parallel.
27 G. Vico, *The New Science*, 131.
28 G. Vico, "Practic of The New Science," in *G. Vico: Science of Humanity*, by G. Tagliacozzo and P. Varene (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976). Hereafter referred to as "Practic". All references to "Practic" are made to paragraph number.
29 Ibid, 1406.
30 Ibid, 1407.
31 Ibid, 1409.
32 Ibid, 1410.
33 Ibid, 1410.
34 Contrast with Sartre: Poetry creates the myth, while the prose writer draws it's portrait. The former uses words as things, not as signs which can be penetrated. As Valency claimed, no one can understand a word to it's very bottom. Here the poet would be denying the *philosophical pretensions* of *The New Science*.
35 G. Vico, *The New Science*, 703.
36 Ibid, 1008.
37 Ibid, 219.
38 Contrast with Yeats: "High on some mountain shelf huddle the pitiless abstractions bald about the necks."
39 G. Vico, *The New Science*, 703.
40 Ibid, 704.
41 Ibid, 708.
42 Ibid, 1105.
43 Ibid, 828, 831.
44 Ibid, 810ff.
45 In a Platonic mood, Vico had written, "Practic", 1409: "In respect of disorder and confusion, it is the men who, by reason of all these properties of matter, would, as far as in them lies, reduce the world of nations to the chaos of the theological poets, which we have found to signify the confusion of the human seed . . ."
46 G. Vico, *The New Science*, 849.
47 Ibid, 806.
48 Ibid, 879.
49 Ibid, 889.
50 Compare this with T.S. Eliot's view: The poet is the point of maximum consciousness in a close-knit society, "the expression of the mind of a whole people."
51 G. Vico, *The New Science*.
52 T.S. Eliot had argued that primitive modes of cognition "persist in civilized men, but become available only through the poet."
53 But it should be born in mind that these terms are used in specific ways by Vico: abstract refers to conceptual universals; refined is always used ambiguously and borders on dissolute, delicate, or over refined; spiritualized implies the formation of numbers, which Vico views problematically, and other universals. The undercurrent of ambivalence in this passage should be noted.
54 G. Vico, *The New Science*, 378.
55 I have also summarized this distinction elsewhere (1974: 193–194) as follows: "the Platonic definition of the abstract has become so entrenched in Western thought . . . that the attempt to prove that primitives are capable (or incapable) of abstracting often centers on the types of abstraction emerging out of Western culture, which is quite irrelevant. While it is true that no primitve group is made up of Platonists in the technical sense of that term (for primitives tend to live, as Radin has put it, "in a blaze of reality") and the various politico-conceptual divisions generic to the state have not yet been established, this does not mean that they do not think abstractly. In the basic sense, every linguistic system is a system of abstractions; each sorting out of experience and conclusion from it is an abstract endeavor; every tool is a symbol of abstract thinking. Indeed, all cultural convention, all custom, is testimony to the generic human capacity for abstracting. But such abstractions are indissolubly wedded to the concrete. They are nourished by the concrete, and they are, I believe, ultimately induced, not deduced. They are not, in short, specifically Platonic abstractions, and they do not have the politicized psychological connotations of the latter."
56 See Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive*, p. 162–165.
57 F. Boas, The Mind of *Primitive Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1938) p. 216ff.
58 S. Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive*, p. 148.
59 G. Vico, The New Science, 431.
60 J. Opland, "Imbongi Nezibongo: The Xhosa Tribal Poet and the Contemporary Poetic Tradition," *Journal of the Modern Language Association*, March, 1975, p. 185ff.
61 G. Cambon, "Vico and Dante," in *G V. Symposium*, p. 17ff.
62 But T.S. Eliot has argued: "Poetry is not the assertion that something is true, it is the creation of a sensuous embodiment."
63 G. Vico, *The New Science*, 217.
64 In contrast, Marx had explicitly denied that he had worked out a "historio-philosophical theory that every people are fated to tread" (see his well-known letter to Mikhalovsky). And he has defined the abstract as a moment in the movement from the concrete to "the reproduction of the concrete in the movement of thought." Marx also refers to the *ascent* from the abstract to the concrete, the opposite of Vico's contention. Further, as he puts it (in *The Holy Family*), he was not interested in the abstract pear of the philosophers, but in the concrete piece of fruit, with its various attributes, the sole reality he was willing to recognize. Although, it deserves to be re-emphasized, Vico may have constructed a theory of history as human praxis, he did not develop a theory of political, or even therapeutic action.

65 G. Vico, *The New Science*, 349.
66 Ibid, 348.
67 Ibid, 916ff.
68 More fully, this simplicity is that of the "few survivors in the midst of an abundance of things necessary for life" who naturally become sociable ". . . thus providence brings back among them the piety, faith, and truth which are the natural foundations of justice as well as the graces and beauties of the eternal beauty of God." Vico, *The New Science*, 1106.
69 G. Vico, *The New Science*, 1108.
70 Ibid, 1108.
71 L. Pompa, *Vico: A Study of the New Science*, p. 124.

Dialectical Anthropology 2 (1977) 19–32