GIAMBATTISTA VICO: 1668 - 1744

- a forgotten eighteenth-century student of early man -

Thesis submitted as requirement for the degree of Master of Arts at the Australian National University.

Owen K. Wheatley.

November 1974.
I, Owen K. Wheatley, declare that the following thesis is entirely my own work and that it contains no material previously published or written by another person except when due reference is made in the text. The full publication details of all works cited in the text appear in the bibliography.
Let disaster befall the man who would try to isolate a single branch of knowledge. He might observe facts, but he could not grasp the spirit giving them life ... Knowledge is one.

JULES MICHELET
GIAMBATTISTA VICO: 1668-1744
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<td>A.N.U.</td>
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<td>De Antiquissima</td>
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<td>P.P.S.</td>
<td>Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society.</td>
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<td>T.L.S.</td>
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INTRODUCTION

The name Giambattista Vico is one that is virtually unknown in the context of anthropological and prehistoric studies. Indeed, personal experience has demonstrated that mention of his name at a gathering of prehistorians or anthropologists elicits the information that most of those present have never heard his name, much less be aware that Vico may have contributed something of significance to the development of their respective disciplines.

My aim in this thesis, therefore, is to isolate, examine and assess the implications of Giambattista Vico's major work, The New Science, for prehistoric studies and for anthropological thought. It is a work in which Vico makes the following claim:

Thus purely by understanding, without benefit of memory ... we seem to have filled in the beginnings of universal history both in ancient Egypt and in the East, which is more ancient than Egypt; and further, within the East, the beginnings of the Assyrian monarchy. For hitherto this monarchy, for lack of its many and varied antecedent causes, which must have been previously at work in order to produce a monarchy ... has appeared in history as a sudden birth, as a frog is born of a summer shower. 1

Vico therefore claimed that The New Science traced the history of pre-classical civilisations. In completing his programme he elaborated a number of highly original philosophical and anthropological, heuristic concepts and models. Their fruitfulness he demonstrated by his epoch making analysis of the Homeric epics; their validity he established by comparative methods.

The task of isolating these concepts is no easy matter for they are submerged beneath a turgid mass of factual detail. The difficulties spring first of all from Vico's stylistic obscurity, an aspect which is discussed at length in Appendix A. A second source of difficulty is the comprehensive nature of Vico's approach. In The Autobiography Vico asserts that Plato "was the equivalent of an entire university of studies". In the

breadth of his approach Vico somewhat resembles Plato for if he is not 'the equivalent of an entire university of studies' he appears to have something to contribute to most of the disciplines which are pursued in a modern Arts faculty: history, philosophy, anthropology, comparative mythology, linguistics, mathematics, sociology, political philosophy, psychology, poetry, aesthetics, Homeric studies, pedagogy and English literature (James Joyce). Scholars active in all these fields have acknowledged that Vico has something to offer their respective disciplines. Indeed, it has been said that

... Vico stands as one of those thinkers whom everyone can read with profit, in whom everyone finds some element of contemporary thought embodied or foreshadowed. 16

Hence Frank Manuel's remark - "there are many mansions in the intellectual house of Giambattista Vico" - is not without foundation.

The multifaceted nature of Vico's scholarship is no accident for he deliberately cultivated it. Indeed, he considered it his duty to do so.

He never discussed matters pertaining to eloquence apart from wisdom, but would say that eloquence is nothing but wisdom speaking; that his chair was the one that should give direction to minds and make them universal; that others were concerned with the various parts of knowledge, but his should teach it

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18. Vico considered wisdom "the faculty which commands all the disciplines by which we acquire all the sciences and arts that make up humanity". See The New Science, 364.
19. Vico held the Chair of Rhetoric at the University of Naples from 1699 to 1741.
as an integral whole in which each part accords with every other and gets its meaning from the whole. 20

Vico thus took all knowledge for his province, eschewing specialisation and thinking it quite unfortunate that disciplines should rest supinely in their own watertight compartments. His approach is, at the same time, both his greatest strength and his greatest weakness. It is his strength because it enables him to appreciate that the division of the disciplines is artificial and that knowledge is one; it is his weakness because whilst trying to say all he succeeds in saying nothing very clearly. Since his approach presupposes an almost universal erudition both on his part and that of his reader it is not surprising his work tends to appear partitive and fragmentary. Most readers of Vico would like him to have said a little less on some matters and a great deal more on others.

An additional factor occasioning difficulty in interpreting Vico is that the ethos in which he worked was very different from our own. He did not live in an atmosphere of rigorous British Empiricism. Consequently one finds that his conclusions are quite often not as firmly supported by logic or empirical evidence as the average 'Anglo-Saxon' would like. Vico relied heavily on intuition, what John Keats called negative capability. Although this may be taken to imply that Vico was poetic in his approach it does not follow that he can be called a mystic in the derogatory sense of the word. Intuitions never occur in a vacuum; they occur in a mind that has been prepared for them. The physicist, for example, has intuitions that bear on physics, not linguistics. Although Vico's approach to knowledge is, in my view legitimate, it does, nevertheless present problems, especially for those committed to the positivistic tradition. In chapters II and III I have therefore attempted to lessen the difficulties by setting Vico in his intellectual and historical

context.

For the reasons stated above, it is not only difficult to interpret the Vichian corpus, it is also impossible to treat of it in its entirety in a single volume. Consequently, this thesis will concentrate on only one fundamental aspect of Vico's thought - what he said of 'primitive' man and 'primitive' culture. To do this adequately, however, one must examine a number of Vichian tenets which, although not specifically prehistorical or anthropological in nature, are quite relevant, for not only is some understanding of them a prerequisite for unravelling Vico's statements about 'primitive' man, they are also tacitly assumed by most modern prehistorians and anthropologists. Although my treatment of them does not pretend to be exhaustive, I therefore discuss in chapters IV and V Vico's epistemological position and his developmental model.

Since my aim in this thesis does not involve tracing the growth or development of Vico's thought, I have restricted this study basically to the De Antiquissima, The Autobiography and The New Science. For a number of reasons this procedure is legitimate. Vico himself considered that he expressed satisfactorily in The New Science what he had expressed in a confused and indistinct way in his earlier works. Everything of consequence that he wrote, beginning with The Study Methods in 1708, he believed to be a more or less incomplete project of The New Science. He valued the Diritto Universale for two passages, the Scienza Nuova Prima for three. None of these five passages has any direct relevance for this thesis. When a publication of his collected works was suggested, Vico

... gave them to understand that of all the poor works of his exhausted genius he wished only the New Science to remain to

23. ibid., p.117.
24. ibid., p.193.
25. ibid., p.192.
In Vico's estimation, then, The New Science contained all that was essential to his thought. A number of his commentators are of the same opinion. T. Whittaker is of the belief that

The separate treatment of Vico's great work [The New Science] is both desirable and possible: desirable because he himself more than once expressed indifference to the survival of any of his other works; and possible because, whatever the defects of his exposition, as unsparingly animadverted on by Italian as by foreign critics, he has in reality brought his "New Science" into a form in which it stands by itself, perfectly clear of every metaphysical doctrine, including even his own occasionally very interesting suggestions. 27

Benedetto Croce, one of the most celebrated of all Vichian scholars, holds a similar view. He suggests that The New Science, together with the De Antiquissima and the autobiography supplies all the necessary material for a knowledge of his thought. 28

A selective procedure therefore appears to be quite legitimate and is certainly not without precedent.

Neither is it here possible or necessary to examine, in detail, the origins of Vico's thought. The immensity of such a task was well appreciated by A. William Salomone:

... however important and revealing it might be, the genetic approach to Vichian thought amounts to a task of such gigantic proportions as to involve not only all the details of his biography but also a review of the major stages of Western philosophy from Plato to Vico himself. 29

Nonetheless it is always essential to be aware of Vico's 'authors' - Plato, Tacitus, Francis Bacon and Hugo Grotius - whom he proposed to have "ever

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26. ibid., p.191. My references to The New Science will be given according to the paragraph numbering of the Bergin and Fisch edition of 1948. As there is no recognised English translation of many of Vico's works, quotations from those which are untranslated will be left in the original Latin or Italian.
before him in meditation and writing". Despite his expressed admiration of these scholars, it is not entirely clear what he intended to convey by adopting them as 'his authors', especially the latter two whom he frequently criticises and who were added to his list some time after the former two.

Vico explains that he admired Plato and Tacitus for the following reason:

... Tacitus contemplates man as he is, Plato as he should be. And as Plato with his universal knowledge explores the parts of nobility which constitute the man of intellectual wisdom, so Tacitus descends into all the counsels of utility whereby, among the infinite irregular chances of malice and fortune, the man of practical wisdom brings things to good issue. Now Vico's admiration of these two great authors from this point of view was a foreshadowing of that plan on which he later worked out an ideal eternal history to be traversed by the universal history of all times. 31

So much, then, for the influence exerted by Plato and Tacitus. The rôle of Bacon and Grotius is less certain. Vico admired Bacon for his comprehensive approach to knowledge as manifest in his De argumentis scientiarum while he lauded Grotius for his system of universal law. Their rôle in The New Science however, seems to be insignificant.

Caponigri has argued that the association of authors is significant for it provides an insight into the history of Vico's own thought:

It indicates, in an oblique manner, the emergence of the speculative problem which will dominate his mature thought... 33

Although this may be true of Plato, Bacon and Grotius, it is difficult to discern in what way Tacitus contributed to the formation of Vico's speculative views. Most of his references to Tacitus are taken from the Germania and are cited principally for the purpose of illustrating Vico's views on the nature of 'primitive' man. Hence it would appear that far from being a speculative inspiration, Tacitus assumed the rôle of a reservoir of factual data.

32. In The New Science there are five references to Bacon, sixteen to Grotius and fifty six to both Tacitus and Plato.
The many criticisms which Vico brings to bear, especially on the methodological approaches of Plato, Bacon and Grotius, not only supports the view that Tacitus contributed little to Vico's speculative approach, it also indicates that Vico did not blindly follow 'his authors'. Indeed, it demonstrates that his relationship with them was a dialectical one; in them he found systems which stimulated in him the development of his own original views. Whatever the rôle of Vico's four models, he had primarily to forge his own thought:

... the influence of these geniuses did not deter him from criticizing them very thoroughly. Solitary, majestic, melancholy, he determined to be himself; himself and none other. 34
CHAPTER I

VICO: PREHISTORIAN, ANTHROPOLOGIST OR 'SUI GENERIS'? 

The View of Prehistorians and Anthropologists

In 1968 a number of scholars from different parts of the world gathered together to celebrate the third centenary of Vico's birth. The publication that issued from this meeting, Giambattista Vico - an International Symposium, contained some forty two papers, only two of which were written by scholars who were in any way connected with prehistory or anthropology. This attitude toward Vico is typical.

Such authoritative works as Glyn Daniel's A Hundred Years of Archaeology, The Idea of Prehistory and The Origins and Growth of Archaeology fail to mention Vico's name. Indeed, I have not read any work by a professional prehistorian in which reference was made to Vico except S. Giedion's The Eternal Present. In this publication, a work which deals more specifically with prehistoric art, Giedion writes of "the towering figure of Giambattista Vico". The nature of the reference, however, makes me strongly suspect that he has never read Vico himself. What Giedion attributes to The Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians should more properly, it seems to me, be ascribed to The New Science.

To a lesser degree, this neglect of Vico is also to be seen in the anthropological literature. An exception to the rule is David Bidney, professor of anthropology at the University of Indiana, who refers to Vico's "philosophical anthropology" and asserts that he devoted himself especially to the study of Homer, with the aim of demonstrating that the Homeric myths can be understood

5. It could of course be argued that Giedion is not a professional prehistorian.
best from the perspective of ethnohistory and that, if properly interpreted, they would provide the key to the door to the mysteries of prehistoric times. 8

Such recognition by professional anthropologists is, however, rare, and in most works on the history of anthropology the treatment of Vico, when he is mentioned, is usually quite brief and in most cases his thought is presented in inadequate and often misleading fashion. The publications of Marvin Harris and Margaret Hodgen deal briefly with Vico, referring to his progressivist account of socio-cultural change and how it is complicated by his notion of corsi and ricorsi. It would appear that if Vico is connected or associated with anything of interest, it is with the notion of recurring socio-cultural patterns; he is the man "who believed in cycles".

A typical example of this attitude can be found in J. S. Slotkin's Readings in Early Anthropology. He includes no quotations from Vico; Slotkin mentions him but once and then as an afterthought. He is discussing seventeenth-century anthropology and remarks that Temple developed a cyclical theory of cultural dynamics, as did Vico a century later. 11

Attitudes such as this led Robert Caponigri to exclaim:

the doctrine of 'ricorsi' is, without doubt, the most celebrated thesis in the entire Vichian theory of history. As is apt to be the case with such doctrines, it has also been the centre of the greatest obscurity, misunderstanding and controversy. 12

Vico, then, when he is recognised by anthropologists, is usually thought of in terms of the corsi and ricorsi, a part of the Vichian thesis which, in my opinion, is quite marginal to his thought as a whole. To conceive of him in such terms is to ignore most of what he had to say that is relevant to the study of very ancient man.

8. ibid., p.259.
10. George De Santillana, 'Vico and Descartes', Osiris, 9, 1950, p.565. Actually, Vico's "cycles" were spirals. See Ch.V.
Vico's View and that of his Commentators

Close reading of The New Science has convinced me that this neglect of Vico by prehistorians and anthropologists is to be deplored. In this work, which runs to some four hundred pages in translation, Vico devotes almost half the volume to an analysis of the dynamics of ancient society. He claims to examine

the founders of the nations, who must have preceded by more than a thousand years the writers \(13\) with whom criticism has so far been occupied. \(14\)

His aim is therefore to extend the reach of history back into the remote past, to the period when writing was not in use, to the preliterate or prehistoric past:

now, since the human mind at the time we are considering had not been refined by any art of writing... \(15\)

Vico most definitely thought that he had contributed something toward a knowledge and understanding of what he called "the obscure and fabulous periods" of history. In the latter part of The New Science he states:

thus purely by understanding, without benefit of memory, which has nothing to go on where facts are not supplied by the senses, we seem to have filled in the beginnings of universal history both in Ancient Egypt and in the East... \(16\)

Vico's belief that he had contributed something of significance to the study of the remote periods of history has received support from many of his commentators. The first of note is a contemporary of Vico's, John Le Clerc. Commenting on Vico's Diritto Universale, a work which Vico claimed was a draft of The New Science, Le Clerc says:

in brief compass he gives us the principal eras from the deluge to Hannibal's invasion of Italy, for here and there throughout the book he discusses various things which took place in that space of time, and makes many philological observations on a

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13. Homer, Herodotus and Livy for example.
15. ibid., 699.
16. ibid., 738.
great number of matters, correcting a quantity of common errors which the ablest critics have passed over. 17

In the absence of recognition by prehistorians and anthropologists it has been philosophers, historians and philosophers of history who have emphasised Vico's significance as a prehistorian and anthropologist. They have made claims which, in view of the neglect manifested by prehistorians and anthropologists, can only be called mystifying.

The historiographer, Sherman B. Barnes, boldly states that

Vico put coherence and meaning in universal pre-history and classical antiquity. His brilliant achievement was founded on a highly learned comparative and evolutionary analysis of early languages, fables, gods, poems, and laws. He used these as sources from which to reconstruct the intellectual, political and economic outlooks and evolution of early man. 18

Harry Levin is another scholar who emphasises the Vichian contribution to prehistory:

in the mythologies of poets, he discovered a symbolic record of prehistory. In the etymologies of words he discovered the lost wisdom of the ancients. 19

Emery Neff also remarks on the worth of Vico's analysis:

by penetrating into prehistory, Vico gained perspective on the course of humanity. 20

Among others to emphasise Vico's preoccupation with ancient man is Paul Hazard who speaks of him as plunging into "the remotest depths of antiquity". R. G. Collingwood notes his (Vico's) peculiar interest in "the history of remote and obscure periods". Lancelot Whyte writes of Vico's "speculative picture of the earliest history of primitive mankind" while Edmund Wilson says of The New Science:

here, before the steady rays of Vico's insight ... we see the fogs that obscure the horizons of the remote reaches of time recede, the cloud-shapes of legend lift. 24

The political historian, C. E. Vaughan, suggests that Vico was the first to recognise that in old legends, old laws, old customs, are embalmed the primitive history, the primitive philosophy, the primitive psychology of the race... 25

Perhaps the most extravagant claim suggesting that Vico is of moment in the sphere of prehistory is that of Benedetto Croce:

it is also worthy of remark that he gives examples of arguments founded on technical observations and leading to conclusions in the sphere of prehistoric archaeology. 26

It would seem, then, that although Vico has been ignored by prehistorians there are those scholars who concede his relevance to prehistoric studies. The testimony of these authors make it very surprising that Vico does not appear in any of the histories of the idea of prehistory.

Philosophers, historians and historiographers have been equally if not more generous in their praise of Vico as an anthropologist. "In the 1720's", claim Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield, insights such as Vico's were not merely original; they were beyond the grasp of most of Vico's contemporaries. Stacked together in the paragraphs of the Scienza Nuova, as in the dark and dusty passages of some over-stocked antique shop, we can find many of the fundamental axioms of twentieth-century anthropology. 27

Similarly, Stuart Hampshire speaks of Vico's "philosophical anthropology", stressing that in his theories of myth and language he (Vico) anticipates... the methods of modern anthropology, yet another science of which he can be reasonably said to have written the first programme. 29

His originality and relevance as an anthropologist are also stressed by H. Stuart Hughes:

indeed, one of Vico's most fruitful suggestions for subsequent social theory was his notion that the mind of primitive man, however odd it might appear at first glance, deserved more sympathetic and discerning treatment than the polite denigration that was usual among his contemporaries. In this guise, Vico

29. 'Vico and his New Science', The Listener, 7 April, 1949, p.570.
stands at the origin of modern cultural anthropology.

Bruce Mazlish maintains that because of his pioneer work in comparative mythology Vico

was also, of necessity, a forerunner of modern anthropology, with its study of primitive cultures... 31

Emery Neff claims that Vico rivalled "Herder's anthropological flair" while Isaiah Berlin suggests that "anthropological historicism" was Vico's "boldest contribution". Enzo Facci considers that Lévi-Strauss, in the field of structural anthropology, frequently makes us think of Vico 34

and Edmund Leach believes that in certain parts of The New Science Vico is really concerned with the same basic problem that repeatedly confronts the anthropologist when he meets with totemic phenomena. 35

Not only is Vico's prowess as an anthropologist lauded, but so also is the pioneering nature of his work. H. Stuart Hughes is of the opinion that anthropologists may well call Vico the first practitioner of their craft. 36

"It is strange and stirring", says Edmund Wilson,

to find in the Scienza Nuova the modern sociological and anthropological mind waking amid the dusts of a provincial school of jurisprudence... 37

The pioneering work of Vico is also recognised by C. E. Vaughan who asserts that

the sphere of Vico ... is primitive history and legend ... he was also the founder of comparative mythology, of anthropology... 38

When one considers such assessments it becomes obvious that one is faced...
with a dilemma. Is the neglect of Vico by British prehistorians and anthropologists justified and the claims of philosophers, historians and historiographers of that same tradition hopelessly mistaken? Or, is the verdict of the latter to be accepted and the neglect of the former to be deprecated? I am of the opinion that the prehistorians and anthropologists are guilty of neglect and shall try to demonstrate this in the remainder of this thesis.

Some Possible Reasons for the Neglect of Vico within the British Tradition

There are many reasons why British historians of prehistory and anthropology would tend to ignore Vico. Perhaps the first of these is that, generally speaking, Vico is not a familiar figure to the English reader. Isaiah Berlin records that when he first went to Oxford in the late Twenties very few spoke of Vico. He considers that, at this time, no one except R. G. Collingwood took a great interest in him. Apparently the situation had not changed greatly by the Thirties for in 1935 H. P. Adams observed:

'It is hardly suspected by ordinary, educated readers in this country/England that, in a period of Italian history which they are accustomed unduly to despise, lived one of the most powerful thinkers and writers of modern Europe...'

Berlin suggests that it was not until after the Second World War that British scholars became really interested in Vico. Despite Berlin's claim there is reason to believe that some British scholars still remain quite unfamiliar with Vico. Norman Hampson, for example, writing in 1968 refers to him as a "Neapolitan priest", a remark which clearly betrays a superficial knowledge of Vico.

41. Robert Flint's work, Vico, published at Edinburgh in 1884 indicates that there were exceptions. It is interesting to note that The Autobiography was first translated into English in 1944, The New Science in 1948.
42. The Enlightenment, Harmondsworth, 1968, p.234. Although Vico had been invited to become a Theatine he declined. He eventually married and fathered at least four children. See Ch.III.
This general neglect of Vico by British scholars is readily explainable in terms of the British philosophical outlook which contrasts sharply with that of Vico. Vico is daring - conjectural and imaginative, relying heavily on intuition. The British tradition dating from Locke, and possibly beyond, is somewhat dull and conservative, relying on an empirical and positivistic approach. Vico dabbles with new and intoxicating ideas that are almost intangible and difficult to verify; the British tradition, more sober in approach, insists on rigorous verification, on evidence that can be seen, touched and measured. The approach of Vico is therefore not akin to that of the British tradition. Berlin explains why Vico was not attractive to the British in the first half of the present century:

the whole atmosphere was unpropitious, because Vico was a philosopher of history and of culture, whereas English philosophy was then in a phase of rising empiricism and unhistorical positivism. 43

Perhaps another factor accounting for Vico's neglect was that he never founded a school of thought. He remained an isolated figure during his life and exercised very little influence outside Italy until his reputation was "almost single-handedly" established by Michelet. By this time, however, it was in many ways too late:

later thinkers had expressed much of what Vico had said at the beginning of the 18th century more clearly and incisively than he... 46

It is to these authors, to Rousseau, to Moezer and to Herder that scholars attribute ideas that had been adumbrated and first elaborated by Vico.

Closely related to Vico's isolation, and perhaps the cause of it, is the fact that the early eighteenth century saw the triumph of Leibniz and Newton. These two giants tend to dominate the period; Leibniz in a number

44. See Ch.III.
46. Ibid., p.392.
of fields ranging from philosophy to diplomacy while Newton was supreme in
the sphere of the natural sciences. During Vico's day, western Europe
was flushed with the optimism of the Enlightenment. The natural sciences
were in the ascendency and, what we would now call the humanities, were
in "limbo". For this very reason Vico was not heard in his own day and
for long afterwards. When the French and especially the German scholars
rehabilitated history in the nineteenth century they came to appreciate
Vico as one who had reached similar conclusions a century earlier. Modern
historical scholarship still tends, however, to regard itself as heir to
the German school. Although Benedetto Croce made great progress in the
late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries toward a complete rehabilita-
tion of Vico, he continues to remain a shadowy figure within the British
tradition.

Another factor contributing to Vico's neglect is the obscurity of his
writings. Isaiah Berlin asks: "why was Vico not read? Because he is
virtually unreadable". The charge of obscurity is one that has been
levelled at Vico ever since the publication of the De Constantia Jurisprud-
entis. In The Autobiography Vico comments on the reception of the work:

...[it] suffered from no other reproof than that of being unintelligible. 50

It is a reproof that has lasted for some two centuries and one that has
been levelled at The New Science with monotonous regularity.

A further factor which could help explain British prehistorians
ignoring Vico is their traditional insularity. Stuart Piggott considers
that before Gordon Childe's The Dawn of European Civilisation appeared in
England in 1925, British prehistory was, at best, "sadly provincial". He

47. See Ch.II.
49. 'Giambattista Vico', p.392.
50. p.158.
51. See Appendix A.
52. 'The Dawn: and an Epilogue', Antiquity, XXXII, 1958, p.75.
goes on to assert that because of this insular climate many of the European ideas introduced by Childe were "not easy to accept". I suspect that this British distrust of 'foreigners' can go a long way toward explaining Vico's absence from the interests of British prehistorians.

I suspect that the most telling reason for Vico's absence from the annals of prehistory is the fact that, despite Croce's claims Vico was not an archaeologist or perhaps better, not an antiquarian. When British prehistorians look back to their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prototypes they look to personalities such as Edward Lhwyd (1660-1708), Henry Rowlands (1655-1723), and William Stukeley (1687-1765). All three were antiquarians, for the most part interested in fossils and other physical remains.

Vico, however, was not an antiquarian and in no sense an archaeologist. Momigliano correctly observes that "the antiquarian movement of the eighteenth century passed him by". In the whole of The New Science there is one, possibly two arguments that could be interpreted as archaeological in nature.

Vico argued that one of the criteria for humanity was the practice of human burial. He also contended that humanity (civilisation or history) first began in high places (mountaintops) where lightning was the most spectacular. If this hypothesis was to be tenable then the majority of human remains should be found on the mountains not in the valleys for those of the latter would be left unburied and so open to destruction while those of the former would be buried and so preserved. Vico was of the opinion that the actual finds supported his case:

... enormous skulls and bones have been found and are still

53. *ibid.*, p.76.
55. *op.cit.*, p.19.
56. See Ch.IX.
found, generally on mountaintops, which is a strong indication that the bodies of the impious giants who were scattered everywhere through the valleys and the plains must have rotted unburied and their skulls and bones must have been swept into the sea by the rivers or completely worn away by the rains. 57

Perhaps a further example of a contention that Vico supports by archaeological means is his belief that the men of the very ancient past were of gigantic stature. Although he had ethnographic information on this topic he appeals also to the supposed artefacts of these people. He takes up the rather vague reference of Suetonius to the extremely large weapons which Augustus kept in his museum. Vico considered that the very size of these weapons indicated that their users must have been giants.

The deficiencies of both arguments are obvious but they still remain some attempt to use material culture to verify hypotheses. Nonetheless, they form an insignificant part of Vico's thought and do not indicate an original breakthrough for as early as the sixteenth century speculations involving "bones" had become "most pedestrian". Such, then, are the occasions on which Vico comes closest to using an archaeological argument. In my opinion they scarcely indicate a person whose primary concern is archaeological matters.

Vico's Relevance to Prehistory

It is for this reason that Vico is omitted from the lists of pioneer prehistorians. For most, the term 'prehistorian' denotes the same thing as the phrase 'prehistoric archaeologist'. It is impossible to be concerned with prehistory unless one is an archaeologist. But does this follow? There is reason to suggest that it does not. Gordon Childe has been

57. *The New Science*, 529. Vico was aware of the importance of material remains for he makes it clear earlier in the work that the distribution of physical remains has "an important bearing" on his argument. See ibid., 369.
extolled as one of the greatest prehistorians of the twentieth century yet he is not celebrated as one of its greatest archaeologists. Indeed, his virtues as an archaeologist, or lack thereof, have been severely attacked. It seems, then, that to be a prehistorian one need not necessarily be an archaeologist; the one does not imply the other. The fact that personalities such as Lhwyd and Stukeley are called antiquarians suggests that there is more to prehistory than the gathering and measuring of 'stones and bones'. To exclude Vico on the grounds that he was not an antiquarian seems somewhat illogical.

If prehistory is not archaeology, what is it? Childe has described it as a discipline which

tries on the one hand to prolong written history backward beyond the oldest literary records, on the other to carry natural history forward from the point where geology and palaeontology would leave it. 62

If Childe's definition is accepted Vico meets the criterion set down for being a prehistorian for he endeavoured to 'prolong written history backward beyond the oldest literary record'. Antiquarians such as Lhwyd and Stukeley are in the tradition for which the latter part of Childe's definition caters.

Prehistory is a complex discipline of which the data rescued by archaeological research is but a part. The prehistorian also has need of concepts for the interpretation of this data. The importance of this latter aspect of prehistory cannot be too greatly stressed for until recently it has been an area which British prehistorians, with the exception of Childe and a few others, have sadly neglected. It is in the sphere of concepts and models that Vico is most relevant.

Although material culture was not Vico's major concern, many of his statements are of great significance for the prehistorian. His notion

63. J.G.D. Clark springs immediately to mind.
that tools are but an extension of the body is an interesting cultural approach to technology:

the invention of this sort of weapon [the spear] proceeded from a just idea of strength, as it were elongating the arm and thus using the body to ward off harm from the body: whereas the arms that are held close to the body belong rather to beasts. 64

He also argued that technologies evolved through several stages. This had occurred both in the case of agricultural tools and of weapons. Agricultural implements had been made of wood before they were fashioned from iron:

before the use of Iron was known, the share had to be made of a sharp piece of very hard wood, capable of breaking and turning the earth. 65

Similarly, the materials from which arms were fashioned had changed. Spears, for example,

before there were arms of iron, were simply poles with their ends burnt and then tapered to a point and given sharp edges to make them suitable for inflicting wounds. 66

Perhaps one of Vico's most interesting arguments, and one that is relevant to the prehistorian, is his argument rejecting the notion that there was a golden (in the metallic sense) age. His conjectures are based on the hypothesis that the term 'gold' only came to be applied to the metal by means of metaphor:

... when they called the ears of grain golden apples, these must have been the only gold in the world. For at that time metallic gold was still unmined, and they did not know how to extract it in crude masses, to say nothing of shining and burnishing it; nor indeed, when men still drank the water of springs, could the use of gold have been at all prized. It was only later, from the metal's resemblance in colour to the most highly prized food of those times that it was metaphorically called gold. 67

It is not only particular statements or arguments of Vico's that are

64. The New Science, 562. It is interesting to compare this with a statement of Christopher Hawkes: human techniques, logically speaking, differ from animal only in the use of extracorporeal limbs, namely tools, instead of corporeal ones only. 'Archaeological Theory and Method: Some Suggestions from the Old World', American Anthropologist, 56, 1954, p.162.
65. The New Science, 16.
66. ibid., 562.
67. ibid., 544.
14.

of significance - it is his entire approach. Vico's genius was in the
sphere of the theoretical. The concepts and models he employed in his
investigation of remote antiquity were fundamentally a product of inspired
intuition. This does not imply that Vico was simply a poet or a mystic.
To verify his hypotheses he employed comparative material which he gleaned
from his reading of the classical authors and the travel literature.
Further fertile sources of information were children and peasants.

Vico's most important sources of inspiration, however, were the myths,
language and customs of the ancient classical societies. The important
factor in his treatment of this body of literature was his utilization of
it as artefactual material. In other words he treated myths, legends and
language as "dumb relics" in much the same fashion as the prehistorian
treats his archaeological finds - as sources of indirect cultural informat­
ion. Vico found that when he dealt with them in this fashion they reveal­
ed much of the society that produced them. Myths, customs and language
were all human artefacts; tangible remains of a living functioning society:

... literature, just as much as tangible works of art, pots and
pans, tools and weapons, is a social artifact. It comes into
being, in whatever form it may take, because it is needed by
contemporary society, fulfilling the psychological requirements
of individuals and of the group. No one composed an epic, a
lyric or a drama without a receptive audience in mind. The com­
poser or writer is himself a child of his age, and however in­
dividual his utterance it will reflect the cultural conditioning
to which he has been subjected since birth. 70

It is evident that if Vico was not dealing primarily with material
artefacts, he was treating of social products (sociofacts, mentifacts)
which, if 'read' with skill, told significantly more of their makers than
they did at first glance. Vico's reconstruction of the history of the
"obscure ages" was a product of inferences from what were apparently silent
remains. This knowledge, like that of the prehistoric archaeologist was
indirect.

68. See Appendix B.
69. See Ch.V.
70. Stuart Piggott in H.C. Baldry, Ancient Greek Literature in its Living
One of the most outstanding features of Vico's approach to the remote past is the way in which he makes it live. In this he complemented, as it were, those antiquarians who had little or no appreciation of, nor sympathy with, the men whose material products they collected. Most antiquarians of Vico's day "neither had nor conveyed a feeling for the antique and the primitive". It was this sensitivity that Vico supplied. Gordon Childe was of the opinion that prehistory should not be a catalogue of dead fossils. He thought that archaeological data should be viewed as "the expressions of living human societies". Vico approached his data in a similar fashion and in doing this he appreciated the qualities of these barbarians as had no other philosopher since the late classical world. In the study of primitives ... Vico captured the spirit of a world that was alien, even repulsive to the rational man of the Enlightenment.

In the light of this discussion, there is a good prima facie case that Vico is a relevant figure in the history of prehistory and anthropology. In the following chapters of this thesis I will examine in detail various aspects of his contribution.

72. Prehistoric Communities of the British Isles, Edinburgh, 1956, p.3.
To the twentieth-century mind history and historians are commonplace. It is not generally realised, however, that the professional historian first appeared in the late nineteenth century and that the emergence of history as a scientific discipline, as a self-contained branch of knowledge with its own peculiar aims and methods of procedure, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Indeed, in the following argument, it is my aim to demonstrate the validity of Cassirer's contention, namely, that Vico was the first to attempt to define the scope and limits of historical knowledge:

what we call "historical consciousness" is a very late product of human civilization. It is not to be found before the time of the great Greek historians. And even the Greek thinkers were still unable to offer a philosophical analysis of the specific form of historical thought. Such an analysis did not appear until the eighteenth century. The concept of history first reaches maturity in the work of Vico. 1

History: a Utilitarian Pursuit

Although the Greeks and Romans did engage in historical activity, they did not concern themselves with establishing historical knowledge on a firm epistemological foundation. They were interested in the events of the past, presuming that they could know them but not asking how it was that they could know a reality which apparently no longer existed. In other words, the historians of the classical period concentrated on the events of the past, not on how they could know these events.

When classical historians did reflect on history, history as an intellectual pursuit as opposed to the events of the past, they were preoccupied with its alleged pragmatic value. Polybius offers an excellent example of the Greek approach:

All historians, one may say without exception, and in no half-hearted manner, but making this the beginning and end of their labour, have impressed on us that the soundest education and training for a life of active politics is the

study of History, and that the surest and indeed the only
method of learning how to bear bravely the vicissitudes
of fortune, is to recall the calamities of others. 2

The same attitude is manifest by Roman historians. Livy, for example,
considers that

the study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind;
for in history you have a record of the infinite variety
of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in
that record you can find for yourself and your country both
examples and warnings; fine things to take as models, base
things, rotten through and through, to avoid. 3

Tacitus proposes much the same idea:

it is from such studies [history] - from the experience of
others - that most men learn to distinguish right and
wrong, advantage and disadvantage. Few can tell them apart
instinctively. 4

In the attitudes displayed by these three authors there is no con­
ception of history as a discipline, worthy of pursuit in its own right.
History is the events of the past and its value is essentially pragmatic.
The past is simply a huge reservoir of events from which examples are
taken to demonstrate a point of moral or political argument. History
is "philosophy teaching by examples". Little thought was given to how
one could be conversant with these examples or why they were examples
at all. Thus Donagan's remark:

if St. Augustine had been confronted with a conflict between
the Scriptures and a Greek or Roman historian, he would
undoubtedly have refused to take the historian seriously. No
Greek philosopher had ever considered historiography to be a
science: Aristotle's remark that "poetry is a more philosophic­
al and higher thing than history" was typical. 5

Generally speaking, this attitude remained prevalent throughout the
Middle Ages and well into the eighteenth century. Although the more
reputable historians of this period recognised the need to employ trust­
worthy sources and scholars such as Ibn Khaldun, Guiccardini, Bacon and Bodin deliberated on the nature of history, little progress was made toward establishing it on a firm epistemological basis. It was still deemed an ancillary pursuit and its prime purpose utilitarian.

The pragmatic approach of sixteenth-and seventeenth-century historians is well exemplified in Thomas Blunderville who considered that history is the handmaid of moral studies. Morality, he says,

... is partly taught by the philosophers in generall precepts and rules, but the historiographers doe teach it much more plainlye by particular examples and experiences. 7

The 'potential' of history in the moral sphere was also appreciated by Jean Bodin:

this, then, is the greatest benefit of historical books, that some men, at least, can be incited to virtue and others can be frightened away from vice. 8

Bodin also asserted the utility of history in the political sphere; a knowledge of it was essential for the man engaged in public affairs:

... for acquiring prudence nothing is more important or more essential than history ... we judge that attention must be given to this subject, especially by those who do not lead a secluded life, but are in touch with assemblies and societies of human beings. 9

The pragmatic value of history was also extolled by Thomas Hobbes. For him, "the principle and proper work of history" was

to instruct and enable men, by the knowledge of actions past, to bear themselves prudently in the present and providently toward the future. 10

Francis Bacon was another who emphasised that the main value of history was its utility:

the use and end of which work [history] I do not so much design for curiosity, or satisfaction of those that are lovers of learning, but chiefly for a more serious and grave purpose; which is this, in a few words, that it will make learned men

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9. ibid., p.17.
10. Quoted by Max Fisch, op.cit., p.27.
Perhaps the seventeenth-century attitude to history in western Europe is best summed up in Le Moyne's remark:

"History is a sustained account of things that are true, outstanding, and of public import, written, with ability, eloquence and judgement, for the instruction of princes and their subjects, and for the edification of the commonalty as a whole."

In view of such statements it seems reasonable to conclude that, generally speaking, the seventeenth-century approach to history was a utilitarian one. History, as "the truthful narration of deeds of long ago", was a vast treasure house from which one could pluck maxims or examples that would guide one in one's daily activities. As such, history was essentially a means, not an end.

This utilitarian approach brought in its wake disastrous consequences. Since history was regarded as a means, it could be used for any need. It therefore could, and often did, become a prime weapon of propagandists. The events of the past came to be conditioned by the end in view, not the argument by the events of the past. This tendency is manifest in Thomas Browne who suggested that the deeds of evil doers be removed from the historical record for as they increase the hatred of vice in some, so doe they enlarge the theory of wickedness in all.

Thus there was the tendency for historians to become selective of their evidence, but the criteria employed for these 'selections' were propagandist. Among many historians eloquence and persuasion tended to replace any quest there had been for truth. Lawrence Eachard, for example, wrote a history of England but refused to use "monkish records". Perhaps

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15. See Paul Hazard, op.cit., p.33.
the disregard for records and accuracy is best illustrated by the story
told of the French historian, Vertot. It is reported that he
had just finished writing his account of the siege of Malta
when someone drew his attention to the existence of some highly
important documents bearing on the subject. Vertot told him
he was too late, he had finished his siege! 16

The unfortunate state into which history had slipped as a result of
its purported raison d'être was highlighted by two phenomena: the discover­
ies that resulted from travel and exploration; and the rise of the natural
sciences. By the seventeenth century Europeans had seen the wonders of
Asia, Africa and America. An account of them, for those not fortunate
enough to actually experience them could be read in the 'travel literature'
that flourished in the aftermath of the voyages of discovery. The widen­
ing of horizons and the collection of new data that accompanied these events
made it clear that many of the old verities were false. Consequently there
was a call for a new approach. In 1636 Henri Brusson wrote:

> The exploration of the globe having resulted in discoveries
> that have destroyed many of the data on which ancient phil­
> osophy reposed, a new conception of things will inevitably
> be called for. 18

Perhaps the inadequacy of the historian's approach was highlighted
to an even greater extent by the advance of the physical sciences. Their
methods set new standards of precision and so brought the inaccurate and
shoddy work of the historian into sharp relief. It came to be realised
that religious and political factors determined many historical accounts
and "the natural conclusion was to distrust the whole tribe of historians".
In the wake of this attitude there developed an aggressive historical
pyrrhonism represented by scholars such as Pierre Bayle and Gabriel
Fontonelle.

The conception that history was pragmatic in purpose, therefore, had

16. loc.cit.
17. See Appendix B.
led to its use, and eventually corruption, by propagandists. Many historians wrote their accounts in biased and inaccurate fashion, doing violence to, and disregarding their sources. When this state of affairs was highlighted by the knowledge gained from the voyages of discovery and the methods of the physical sciences, history came to be regarded in sceptical fashion. When it was realised that its accuracy could not be depended upon there came to be less praise for its usefulness. The utilitarian approach was thus destructive of history. As Descartes observed:

... even the most faithful record, although it may neither change the facts, nor enhance their value, in order to make them more worthy of being related, at least always omits the least dignified and the least illustrious circumstances. Thus, the rest does not appear such as it really was, and those who regulate their behaviour by the examples they derive from it are prone to fall into the extravagances that afflict the Paladins of our romances, and to conceive designs that exceed their powers. 20

Descartes: the End-Product of the Utilitarian Approach

The unhealthy state into which history had fallen was crystallised in the philosophy of René Descartes. His position was a product of historical pyrrhonism and, in turn, helped accelerate it. The Cartesian analysis was in many ways, a quest for security that was occasioned by the breakdown of the Medieval Synthesis.

In a period when scepticism was rife Descartes set out to reestablish all knowledge on sound epistemological foundations by employing a procedure of systematic doubt:

Not that I was imitating those sceptics who doubt for the sake of doubting ... on the contrary, my whole object was always to achieve certainty... 21

By employing this apparently critical method he found that there was one thing that he could not doubt - his own existence.

But then, immediately, as I strove to think of everything as false, I realized that, in the very act of thinking everything false, I was aware of myself as something real; and observing

21. ibid., p.58.
that the truth: I think, therefore I am, was so firm and so assured that the most extravagant arguments of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I concluded that I might have no scruple in taking it as that first principle of philosophy for which I was looking. 22

When Descartes reflected on this 'truth', he came to the conclusion that its certainty was guaranteed by his ability to perceive it clearly and distinctly. He therefore asserted that the criterion of knowledge was clarity and distinctness of perception. The road to knowledge lay in assenting only to those propositions which were clearly and distinctly true and to proceed by deduction from these to other truths.

Not unexpectedly he took mathematical propositions as the paradigms of certain knowledge. In the words of Isaiah Berlin, mathematics was, in Descartes' view, a "lucid, rigorous, irrefutable" discipline

in which from undeniable premises and by means of logical steps, you arrive at conclusions which are equally indestructible: a magnificent structure of unbreakable, luminous, rational argument... 24

In the opinion of Descartes history did not compare very favourably. Were its propositions true by reason of their clarity and distinctness? Did it proceed from simple to more complex truths by deductive methods. Obviously it did not.

The propositions of history therefore did not meet the criteria of knowledge laid down by Descartes. The historian's claims to knowledge were not only vain; they could not be anything else but vain. Knowledge in an historical context was therefore an impossibility. The belief that history could assist one in the regulation of one's daily affairs was, accordingly, a mistaken one. The only service that history could provide was a certain balance for the mind:

It is good to know something about the manners and customs of other nations so that we may judge more sanely of our own, and

22. ibid., p.61.
23. ibid., pp.62, 118.
24. 'Giam battista Vico', The Listener, 28 September, 1972, p.393. See also René Descartes, op. cit., p.104.
may not think that whatever is contrary to our own mode of life is both ridiculous and unreasonable. 25

In Cartesian circles, therefore, the stocks of history were at a low ebb. Not only was history considered an inaccurate pursuit; it was also deemed unworthy of serious intellectual endeavour since it lacked any valid epistemological foundation.

The Attempt at Critical History

Despite Descartes and the opinions he embodied, indeed, perhaps in reaction to them, historical activity continued and at the end of the seventeenth century a 'renaissance' of historical treatises swept Europe. The origins of this occurrence were greatly conditioned by two phenomena which had occurred approximately one hundred years before the floruit of Descartes - the Reformation and the rise of nationalism.

Francis Bacon makes much of the effect of the Reformation on historical studies.

Martin Luther ... being no ways aided by the opinions of his own time, was enforced to awake all antiquity, and to call former times to his succour, to make party against the present time. 27

The challenge was accepted by the scholars of the Counter-Reformation and they met the enemy on their own ground - history.

A similar stimulus was provided by the growth of national states. These states became interested in their own origins and by employing scholars to research into them encouraged a new outgrowth of historical activity. Thus Mabillon and Montfaucon contributed notably to French history; Muratori was employed by the Duke of Modena and Leibniz was, for forty years, historian to the house of Brunswick.

The severe criticism, of which history, long before the time of Descartes, had been a recipient, incited some scholars to attempt a more

27. op.cit., pp.34-5.
28. See Max Fisch, op.cit., p.22.
critical approach. Max Fisch aptly expresses the situation:

it was an easy and inevitable step from criticism of history to historical criticism, and the latter was in fact a later phase of the same movement. 29

Consequently historians began to become more concerned with method. As early as 1565 Jean Bodin asserted that if history was to be of any use historians must pay more attention to method:

... I have been led to write this book, for I noticed that while there was a great abundance and supply of historians, yet no one has explained the art and the method of the subject. Many recklessly and incoherently confuse the accounts, and none derives any lessons therefrom. 30

One of the most important tasks confronting the historian was the gathering of his sources. The work of collecting and editing manuscripts was accelerated by the humanists who were assisted in their program by the dissolution of the monasteries of northern Europe. According to Bacon it was as a result of the Reformation that

... the ancient authors, both in divinity and in humanity, which had long time slept in libraries, began generally to be read and resolved. This by consequence did draw on a necessity of a more exquisite travail in the languages original, wherein those authors did write, for the better understanding of those authors, and the better advantage of pressing and applying their words. 31

Scholars concentrated not only on source collection and the ancillary skills associated with this task, they also advocated that records should be interpreted in a critical fashion. Thus they emphasised that one should not accept as true all that one read:

In order, then, that the truth of the matter may be gleaned from histories, not only in the choice of individual authors but also in reading them we must remember what Aristotle sagely said, that in reading history it is necessary not to believe too much or to disbelieve flatly. 32

29. ibid., p.30.
31. Francis Bacon, op.cit., p.35. It should be noted that not all ancient authors had slept in the Middle Ages. See C.H.Haskins, The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, New York, 1960, pp.224-7. Nor were Medieval scholars completely ignorant of foreign languages. Note, for example, William Moerbeke, celebrated thirteenth-century translator of Aristotle.
A similar suggestion is to be found in Bacon who advises against "accepting or admitting things weakly authorised or warranted". Thomas Browne also reflects the new emphasis on a critical approach since he decries an unhealthy adherence to authority which he believed had prevented the growth of knowledge:

... the mortallest enemy unto knowledge, and that which has done the greatest execution upon truth, hath beene a perempory adhesion unto Authority...

Perhaps one of the more significant indications of the quest for a more critical history in the seventeenth century was the growing appreciation of the value of non-literary evidence. The value of this latter type of evidence was appreciated both in England and on the Continent. Thomas Browne, for example, asserts that the treasures of time lie high, in Urnes, Coynes, and Monuments, scarce below the roots of some vegetables.

The underlying conviction of Francesco Bianchini's *La Istoria Universale provata con monumenti e figurata con simboli degli antichi* (1697) was that material evidence provides a firmer basis for history than does literary evidence. Momigliano goes so far as to claim that at this time it was assumed that charters and other public statements, coins, inscriptions, and statues were better evidence than literary sources.

Although there were attempts at critical history in the seventeenth century, activity in this sphere was confined essentially to the lower level; there was "almost none in the invention and testing of explanatory hypotheses". Both Bodin and Bacon consigned history to the non-rational element of the mind, the memory. They had no conception of the historian as a...
model builder, as one who constructs hypotheses and interprets 'facts' in the light of these models. It is not surprising therefore that even the best histories of the seventeenth century appear as "catalogues of atomistic erudition".

Pierre Bayle, for example, a prominent advocate of historical pyrrhonism, "gloried in the systematic juxtaposition of unrelated facts". Even the greatest minds of the century contributed little to the elaboration of new historical concepts. Leibniz concentrated on the auxiliary sciences that helped establish historical accuracy, his contribution being to lower criticism. His conception of history remained that of the old exemplar theorists:

The chief end of history, like that of poetry, is to teach prudence and virtue by examples, and to exhibit vice in such a way as to arouse aversion and lead to its avoidance. 44

It is evident that Leibniz's theory of history manifests little difference from that of Polybius. It is fundamentally the same approach as that of Bodin. Bodin's endeavours, however, had not been sufficient to prevent the onslaught of Descartes and so there is no reason to suggest that Leibniz's offering rendered the position of history any more secure. The inadequacy of the seventeenth century critical approach is therefore apparent. What was needed was something much more radical than lower level criticism; there was a need for an answer to Descartes, a justification of historical knowledge. Momigliano, while acknowledging the contribution of the seventeenth-century scholars, isolates their weakness:

what characterizes the writing of history in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries is the large number of historians whose main concern was to ascertain the truth of each event by the best methods of research. They shared this preoccupation with the contemporary antiquarians whose methods, in fact, they often followed... Both aimed at factual truth, not at interpretation of causes or examination of consequences ... thinking was not their profession. 45

41. A. Grimaldi, op.cit., p.18.
42. Max Fisch, op.cit., p.30.
44. Quoted by Max Fisch, op.cit., p.23.
Remote Antiquity

The area in which the inadequacy of the seventeenth-century critical approach to history became especially apparent was in the sphere of 'Origins' — "histories which may by one common name be termed the Antiquities of the world". In this field there appeared to be an abundance of raw data but very little idea of how it could be utilized.

The sources whence historians had drawn their accounts of the 'origins of nations' were the classical authors and the bible. Although the latter continued to exercise its traditional pre-eminent position, by the seventeenth century the accounts of the former began to be questioned. Thomas Browne pointed out that the ancients had been wrong in many things and so there was no reason uncritically to accept them on antiquities:

Having thus totally relinquished them in some things, it may not be presumptuous, to examine them in others, but surely most unreasonable to adhere to them in all, as though they were infallible or could not err in any way. 48

He rejected the opinion that since the ancients were closer in time to the period in question they were well informed as to the events occurring therein:

And the farther removed from present times are conceived to approach nearer unto truth itself. Now hereby me thinks we manifestly delude ourselves, and widely walk out of the tracke of truth. 49

Not only the veracity but also the scope of the classical records was questioned. No system of chronology from the Creation to the Trojan War could be obtained from the Greeks:

they had nothing older than the Trojan history, which Thucydides said was fabulous for the most part, and since Homer himself ... flourished two hundred years after the Trojan War, it is natural that they reported common errors and fables instead of true history. 50

49. ibid., p.20.
A similar view was entertained by Browne:

... the Heathens or histories of the Gentiles afford us slender satisfaction, nor can they relate any story, or affixe a probable point to its [history] beginning... 51

This paucity of the record was made more acute by the total absence of any conceptual apparatus. There was plenty of raw material but very little evidence. Myths and fables, because of the lack of interpretative concepts were considered useless. Pierre Bayle became convinced that the ancients "lied as glibly and freely as we speak" while Gabriel Fontenelle asserted that oracles were the product of "knavery". There was little if any notion that the history of remote antiquity could be reconstructed by inference, by observing the unconscious traces that ancient peoples had left behind:

... we must confess, in matters of Antiquity, and such as are decided by History, if their Originals and first beginnings escape a due relation, they fall into great obscurities, and such as future Ages seldom reduce unto a resolution. 54

Browne's thoughts were to be echoed by Dr. Johnson, who in the following century asserted that "we can know no more than what old writers have told us".

In view of the deficiency of both records and interpretative models the attitude of scholars toward the history of remote antiquity became one of scepticism and resignation. Francis Bacon concluded that the... antiquities of the first age (except those we find in sacred writ) were buried in oblivion and silence... 56

Bacon's attitude was almost one of despair:

As to the heathen antiquities of the world, it is vain to note them for deficient; deficient they are no doubt, consisting most of fables and fragments; but the deficiency cannot be holpen; for antiquity is like fame ... her head is muffled from our sight. 57

51. Pseudoxia Epidemica: or Enquiries into Commonly Presumed Truths, p.273.
52. See Paul Hazard, op.cit., p.106.
53* ibid., 164.
54. Thomas Browne, Pseudoxia Epidemica: or Enquiries into Commonly Presumed Truths, p.328.
The position in which Bacon and others found themselves with respect to the remote past could only be alleviated by the introduction of a new conceptual apparatus. They possessed many fragments of antiquity but because of their conceptual framework were unable to utilize them. Their position was somewhat similar to that of the nineteenth-century antiquarian, Nyerup:

everything which has come down to us from heathendom is wrapped in a thick fog; it belongs to a space of time which we cannot measure. 58

Vico's Proposals for a Solution

It is evident that by the dawn of the eighteenth century there was a pressing need for historians to supply solutions to two important questions. The first consisted in the necessity of establishing the epistemological foundations of historical knowledge. No scholar had provided a satisfactory answer to Descartes and so the epistemological claims of historians were still without justification. The critical approach to history that had been accelerated by the Cartesian attack had proved ineffective for not only did it not meet Descartes on a philosophical level, it also failed to generate interpretative concepts, the absolute necessity of which became obvious in the sphere of pre-classical history. This then was the second problem facing historians for without such concepts the investigation of remote antiquity was impossible.

It was these two problems that Vico confronted and purportedly solved. He met Descartes on his own ground and demonstrated the fallacious nature of the cogito. By elaborating a new epistemology he vindicated the historian's claims to knowledge. His solution to this general problem, i.e. how do historians know?, paved the way for his answer to the particular question, i.e. how can historians know the remote past? In other words, his new epistemology suggested to him a number of interpretative concepts and models

58. Quoted by Glyn Daniel, op.cit., p.7. Christian Thomsen was to alleviate Nyerup's problem by introducing the Three Age System.
59. See Ch.IV.
which were essentially developmental and dynamic in nature. These he claimed when applied to the products of ancient peoples—myths, language, laws, customs—would help the historian shed great light on remote antiquity.

Vico contended that his predecessors had failed in their endeavours because they were possessed of the "logic of the learned". The many errors, absurdities and impossibilities which appeared in their accounts of the 'obscure ages' were a result of their vitiating their data by their prejudices, what Vico called conceits.

The conceits, he asserted, flowed from certain properties of the human mind:

because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance, man makes himself the measure of all things. 61

It is this characteristic which leads the mind "to believe that the things it does not know are vastly greater than in fact they are". These are the factors, therefore, which explain the growth of rumour and it is the latter which is responsible for many errors:

in the long course that rumour has run from the beginning of the world it has been the perennial source of all the exaggerated opinions which have hitherto been held concerning remote antiquities unknown to us... 63

Vico asserted that a second property of the human mind was that of judging the cultural material of other societies by criteria that only properly pertain to one's own:

It is another property of the human mind that whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar at hand. 64

According to Vico this characteristic was responsible for many errors that scholars and indeed whole nations had entertained about the beginnings of humanity (history), for when the former began to examine the remote past, it was on the basis of their own enlightenment, cultivated and

60. See Ch.V.
61. The New Science, 120.
62. ibid., 48.
63. ibid., 121.
64. ibid., 122/
magnificent times that they judged the origins of humanity, which must nevertheless by the nature of things have been small, crude and quite obscure. 65

It was Vico's belief, therefore, that these two attributes of the human mind had given rise to the "conceit of nations" and the "conceit of scholars". Every nation, Vico asserted,

whether Greek or barbarian, has had the same conceit that it before all other nations invented the comforts of human life and that its remembered history goes back to the very beginning of the world. 66

Once this was realised, he argued, little credence could be given to the extravagant claims of the Chaldeans, Scythians, Egyptians and Chinese.

The conceit of scholars consisted in their belief "that whatever they know is as old as the world". It was this assumption which had led them to attribute rare wisdom to the ancients. If one appreciated, however, that the myths and fables were the products of rude and unsophisticated men, one must reject

all the mystic meanings with which the Egyptian hieroglyphs are endowed by the scholars, and the philosophical allegories which they have read into the Greek fables. 69

It was Vico's belief that these prejudices and assumptions had nullified historians' attempts to produce an accurate account of the remote past. Any serious investigation of this latter period must therefore free itself of "the conceits". In view of this he emphasised the need for a radically new approach:

... we trust that we shall offend no man's right if we often reason differently and at times in direct opposition to the opinions which have been held up to now concerning the beginnings of the humanity of the nations. 70

The new approach could neither rely solely on the historians nor the philosophers for both had been victims of "the conceits". One could not

65. Ibid., 123.
66. Ibid., 125.
67. Ibid., 126.
68. Ibid., 127.
69. Ibid., 128. For an example of this procedure see Francis Bacon's 'The Wisdom of the Ancients' in The Works of Francis Bacon, Vol.III.
70. The New Science, 118.
take literary records at their face value since they had been inflated by proud patriots while the conceptual framework of the philosophers was too static:

... on the one hand the conceit of nations, each believing itself to have been the first in the world, leaves us no hope of getting the principles of our Science from the philologists. And on the other hand the conceit of the scholars, who will have it that what they know must have been eminently understood from the beginning of the world, makes us despair of getting them from the philosophers. 71

Vico's solution involved applying the method, which Bacon had elaborated for the natural sciences, to "the civil affairs of mankind". As Vico understood it, this involved proceeding by means of hypothesis and verification. The data provided both the stimulus for the construction of an hypothesis and was also used to test the validity of that hypothesis. Such an approach, Vico considered, implied the unification of philosophy and philology in a single science - a new science. The philosophical element consisted in erecting hypotheses; the philological element consisted in the verification of those hypotheses:

These philological proofs enable us to see in fact the things we have meditated in idea concerning this world of nations, in accordance with Bacon's method of philosophizing... Thus it is that with the help of the preceding philosophical proofs [concepts, models], the philological proofs [data] which follow both confirm their own authority by reason and at the same time confirm reason by their authority. 74

Vico recognised, therefore, that what was of prime importance was not the discovery of new data but the elaboration of categories, heuristic devices, which would organise and so help interpret the data already in hand. In this approach the data played a dual role - it was that which was explained and that which did the explaining. This concept was crucial

71. ibid., 330.
72. ibid., 163.
73. Vico defined as philologists "all the grammarians, historians, critics, who have occupied themselves with the study of the languages and deeds of peoples: both their domestic affairs, such as customs and laws, and their external affairs, such as wars, peace, alliances, travels and commerce". ibid., 139.
74. ibid., 359.
for it implied that if a scholar was sufficiently skilled he could make "dumb relics" speak. Vico asserted that this method would reduce philology to a science.

In accord with his arguments concerning "the conceits", Vico laid it down as an axiom that "doctrines must take their beginning from that of the matters of which they treat". By this he meant that if one was to utilize fruitfully the artefacts of an ancient society one must communicate with the makers of these objects. It was only by adopting the outlook of the men who made them that the historian could appreciate them for what they were. It was for this reason that Vico devoted a substantial part of The New Science to the isolation of the characteristics of the mind of early man.

It follows, therefore, that if one is to understand The New Science one must communicate with Vico. This involves, as Vichian principles indicate, some knowledge of the mind of the man who wrote The New Science. It, too, is the product of a mind and so fully to appreciate it one must adopt, as far as possible, the mind of Vico.

76. The New Science, 390.
77. ibid., 314.
CHAPTER III

VICO AND HIS WORLD

One of Vico's primary concerns in The New Science was to present an account of the history of the period from the time of the deluge to the age of Herodotus in Greece and the Second Punic War in Italy. The sources he employed were laws, customs and myths of the ancient classical societies. Vico considered that it was useless to attempt an understanding of these fragments of antiquity out of context, isolated from the peoples who made them. If these artefacts were approached as one would approach a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century creation they would and could only remain a meaningless mass, a jungle that was unintelligible and of little use to the historian. This, indeed, was the conclusion to which most of Vico's contemporaries and predecessors had come.

Vico argued that the fragments of antiquity should be viewed as the products of minds which operated in a fundamentally different fashion from the modern mind. He urged that if one proceeded to utilize this hypothesis, and discerned the nature of the mind which created these artefacts, they would become quite intelligible and shed great light on the history of the period during which they evolved.

To gain some insight into the nature of the mind of early man, the mind that had made these ancient myths, laws and customs, was, Vico records, no simple matter:

impossible and contradictory opinions that scholars entertained concerning the history of, what he called, the obscure ages. He therefore laid down as an axiom:

Doctrines must take their beginning from that of the matters of which they treat. 2

It is clear that Vico considered that the artefacts of a people provided the only clue to their history. If these surviving remains were to be interpreted validly, however, it was necessary that the historian regard them much as their makers had. If this was not done the cultural objects would retain their secrets - they would remain unintelligible. Thus Vico urged that to understand the traces left by ancient man the historian must get inside his mind and virtually adopt his thought patterns.

The traversing of cultural boundaries, though difficult, was to Vico, both possible and necessary. The difficulty and necessity have already been mentioned. Despite the difficulty Vico believed that he did manage to accomplish the task. In his efforts he was assisted by one very important realisation: all artefacts of ancient man were human products. Although ancient man was different from modern man he was still man. Thus Vico's clue:

... in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and neverfailing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society [history] has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. 3

The problem confronted by Vico is common to all historians seeking to say something significant about persons or events which existed or occurred in a culture that is geographically or chronologically removed from their own. It is a problem that anyone wishing to comprehend The New Science must face. Vico lived in a society that was very different from that of twentieth-century Australia. To do justice to Vichian thought, therefore, it is necessary to view Vico's writings in perspective - it is essential to cross the cultural boundary. Some knowledge of Vico and his environment is therefore imperative

2. ibid., 314.
3. ibid., 331.
for according to his principle the one clue that we have to the jungle that is The New Science is that Vico made it:

in the night of thick darkness enveloping The New Science, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and neverfailing light of a truth beyond all question: that The New Science has certainly been made by Vico and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. 5

Vico's principle necessitates some attempt to assume his mental framework. I shall therefore keep his maxim in mind, begin at the beginning, and attempt to abandon the twentieth-century mind and adopt Vico's.

The Social, Political, Economic and Intellectual Climate of Vico's Naples

For the purposes of this thesis the beginning is at Naples. What does one say of Naples? In his work The European Mind (1680-1715), Paul Hazard presents an appreciation of Naples which, I believe, is indicative of the Vichian style and one in which Vico would have rejoiced.

Naples! the sun! what joy to be alive! Hark to the shouting and the tumult! See, in the narrow, winding streets, what swarms of people, the most mercurical people in the world! What vivacity! What zest! Where shall we find their like? And how keen they are to learn, to improve their minds! How animated they are! How eagerly they converse! Look at their assemblies, their salons, where men, carrying the burden of profound learning with graceful ease, discuss the various questions that engage the attention of philosophers and men of science, consider the various schools of thought and weigh the facts. At Naples, which receives, because it always keeps its ears open, the latest tidings of all that is being said and thought in Europe, at Naples, the old, original, tumultuous Naples, which stands forth as the very embodiment of force and vitality, there was born into the world on the 23rd June, 1668, a certain Giambattista Vico. 6

The force and vitality that Hazard attributes to Neapolitans in general appears on every page of The New Science. If Hazard's description is accurate then, once one has read The New Science, one would be very surprised if Vico were not a Neapolitan.

The Naples into which Vico was born, however, had faded somewhat from its former glory. The days of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen and the Italian

4. See Appendix A.

5. See The New Science, 331.

Renaissance were long gone and in Vico's day it was the countries of northern Europe that exercised political and intellectual hegemony.

For the first thirty two years of Vico's life Naples was a possession of Spain, was ruled by viceroys and had been so for more than a century and a half. That the kingdom of Naples, in the latter part of the seventeenth century "was badly governed and burdened with exorbitant taxes", is well attested by contemporary observers, both native and foreign. After his visit to Naples in 1701 Joseph Addison wrote that

... the subjects are miserably harassed and oppressed ...

He also commented on the "extreme poverty" of the inhabitants and the economic degradation in general. Although Pietro Giannone passed favourable judgment on Charles II and was full of praise for Del Carpio's reforms he did remark on the havoc wrought by the Banditi, especially during the Sicilian War (1674-1678), and on the heavy taxation. Before the reforms of Del Carpio the situation in Naples had been critical:

Upon the Marquis of Astorga's Arrival in Naples, he found the City not only afflicted with a great Scarcity of Corn, but quite ruined by continual Crimes, and especially Robbery, which was committed in all Corners. If the political and social situation at Naples was far from healthy so too was the economic. The emergence of the Atlantic maritime powers brought economic ruin to Italy. The coinage was reduced to "less than the fourth Part of its first Value" and counterfeiters flourished. Giannone

8. loc. cit.
10. ibid., p.419.
11. ibid., p.429.
13. ibid., pp.824-826. Del Carpio was viceroy at Naples from 1683 to 1687.
14. ibid., p.818.
15. ibid., p.808.
16. ibid., p.807.
17. E.P. Noether, Seeds of Italian Nationalism 1700-1815, New York, 1951, p.16
records that goldsmiths adulterated their Work, by putting more Allay in it than the Laws of the Kingdom allow, which proved a great Hindrance to Commerce. 19

It is clear from Giannone's remarks that Naples in the latter part of the seventeenth century was in an unhappy situation. Noether summarises the state of affairs:

malgoverned at home, ignored abroad, the mass of the people acquired a somewhat apathetic outlook on life, giving to this century a semblance of stagnation. 20

The opening decades of the eighteenth century increased rather than alleviated Naples' misfortunes. In 1700 Charles II of Spain died, an event which precipitated the Spanish War of Succession. Consequently for some thirteen years Naples became the scene of "incessant strife, conspiracy, and misrule". Despite the settlement made by the treaty of Utrecht in 1713, Naples witnessed thirty four years of bitter strife, for Italy became a battleground in which France, England and the emperor were engaged in resisting the attempts of Spain to upset the Utrecht settlement and restore Spanish rule in the peninsula. 22

From 1713 to 1734 Naples was ruled by Austria. According to Giannone the Austrians were judicious and good rulers. Naples, however, still had her problems for although some attempt was made to improve economic conditions ... little could be done to alleviate the poverty, disease and lawlessness that had for so long been endemic in the Two Sicilies. 24

In 1734, the Kingdom of Naples was conquered by Charles III of Bourbon. Charles, by most accounts, proved himself an enlightened ruler who sought the good of the kingdom. By this time, however, Vico's academic career had run its course and it was in the reign of Charles that he died.

During Vico's lifetime Naples experienced a condition of economic and

19. ibid., p.818.
23. op.cit., p.837.
25. See loc.cit.
political depression. Such a state of affairs was not conducive to first-rate intellectual activity. Perhaps the greatest factor stifling intellectual endeavour, however, was the Church. At the time in question, Naples was a strong centre of the Counter-Reformation. It was, therefore, subject to the repressive measures of Trent, the Jesuits and the Inquisition, of which there were three forms. Not only were foreign soldiers in the citadels, remarks Robert Flint, the Jesuits were in the schools. For the latter, all learning was to be harnessed to the "chariot of religion".

Joseph Addison was amazed at the hold religion had in Naples:

> I must confess, though I had lived above a year in a Roman Catholic country, I was surprised to see many ceremonies and superstitions in Naples that are not so much as thought of in France.

It was this situation that led Isaiah Berlin to describe Naples as "culturally a somewhat backward, and certainly a very theologically minded, city".

One may conclude then, that the climate at Naples in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was not conducive to bold and audacious thinking.

Despite this unpropitious milieu, Naples was not completely bereft of scholarly activity. Indeed, a number of authors suggest that the latter part of the seventeenth century saw an intellectual revival at Naples; a "cultural risorgimento", as Patrick Gardiner calls it.

The sixteenth, seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century witnessed in Italy the beginning, development, and climax of the quarrel between the Ancients and Moderns. At first the Ancients had almost complete

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32. For some discussion of the activity of the Inquisition at this time see Appendix A.
control of the universities and used as weapons the civil and ecclesiastical censorships. As a last resort they would call on the Inquisition. The Moderns on the other hand had to rely on patronage. Giannone records how the Duke de Medina

encouraged Learning and Learned Men to a great Degree, assembling them in his Palace, where with vast Attention and Complaisance, he heard their different Compositions. So that the Belles Lettres, which in the preceding Government had got footing among us, became more flourishing and were more firmly established. 36

To concentrate their resources the Moderns gathered together in societies and formed academies. Thus it was that groups such as the Investiganti and Uniti flourished in the late seventeenth century. In these academies were to be found the "real promoters of discovery and criticism" and it was their influence, claims Fisch, that

spread through the city and raised the average level of its culture to a height unequalled before or since. 39

Despite all this intellectual activity, thought at Naples, even if Fisch's claim is granted, remained basically eclectic and unenterprising. Vico himself suggests that learning in the Naples of his day was very superfluous and remarks, somewhat reproachfully, that

... in the city taste in letters changed every two or three years like styles in dress. 41

In 1644 John Milton had written of Italy:

nothing had been there written now these many years but flattery and fustian. 42

The position was somewhat similar in the mid 1720's. When Jean Le Clerc, a Belgian scholar of international standing, wrote to Vico in a very enthusiastic fashion about his (Vico's) Diritto Universale, Vico's Neapolitan critics

36. op.cit., p.831.
41. The Autobiography, p.133.
suggested it was just a private compliment and that Le Clerc would treat
the work harshly when he reviewed it in his journal. They considered
it impossible

that as a result of this work of Vico's Le Clerc should be
willing to retract what he had been saying for nearly fifty
years, namely that Italy produced no works that could stand
comparison for wit or learning with those published in the
rest of Europe. 43

In spite of Giannone's claims for the University of Naples Italy was
no longer in the van of European thought; no longer the leader but the imit-
ator. Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley and Newton all came
from the North. It was in such an unpromising environment that Vico carried
out his scholarly activities. His intellectual independence and individual-
ity are thus highlighted against a mediocre backdrop.

Vico's Boyhood

Vico's life itself falls readily into four periods. The first of
these, his boyhood, extends from 1668 to 1686. He tells us that

his father was of a cheerful disposition, his mother of a
quite melancholy temper; both contributed to the character
of their child. He was a boy of high spirits and impatient
of rest... 45

It was undoubtedly this 'impatience of rest' that occasioned his fall from
the top of a ladder which resulted in his fracturing his skull. He con-
sidered this to be a providential event for

as a result of this mischance he grew up with a melancholy and
irritable temperament such as belongs to men of ingenuity and
depth, who, thanks to the one, are quick as lightning in per-
ception, and thanks to the other, take no pleasure in verbal
cleverness or falsehood. 46

His schooling was a-typical. Although he imbibed the normal amount

43. The Autobiography, p.159.
44. op.cit., p.843.
45. The Autobiography, p.111. It should be noted that Vico wrote his
autobiography in the third person.
46. ibid., p.111.
of degenerate Scholasticism it appears that even as a boy he was possessed of a very independent mind and strong will for when he decided it was a waste of time attending a certain school he left it. He did this on no less than four occasions and pursued his studies by himself. He was not one of those too docile disciples who meekly lap up everything their masters tell them. 48

Indeed, he was quite "impatient of dawdling methods and pedantic masters" for when he found that

in Verde's lessons only the memory was exercised and the intellect suffered from lying idle, 51

he decided to study Hermann Vulteius and the civil institutes by himself. Thus it was that Vico escaped from the normal, stilted and burdensome education that was the common lot of most Neapolitan boys. It was on account of this irregular schooling, directed and carried out for the most part by himself, that Vico, in later life, was known as "the autodidact", a title of which he was quite proud.

As a boy Vico showed signs of being a child prodigy and from his earliest years manifested great enthusiasm for reading. He recounts how he

... would sit down at his desk at nightfall; and his good mother, after rousing from her first slumber and telling him for pity's sake to go to bed, would often find that he had studied until daybreak. 54

47. Francis Bacon held Scholasticism in scant regard: This kind of degenerate learning did chiefly reign amongst the schoolmen; who having sharp and strong wits, and abundance of leisure, and small variety of reading, (but their wits being shut up in the cells of a few authors, chiefly Aristotle their dictator, as their persons were shut up in the cells of monasteries and colleges,) and knowing little history, either of nature or time, did, out of no great quantity of matter, and infinite agitation of wit, spin out unto us those laborious webs of learning, which are extant in their books.


50. Bon Francesco Verde was a famous and popular lecturer in law who was at this time at the University of Naples.
52. Ibid., p.136.
53. Ibid., pp.111-112.
54. Ibid., pp.112-113.
Vico's enthusiasm led him to begin reading Paulus Venetus but he found the latter beyond his youthful mind, a discovery which was the occasion of great sorrow and despair. Thus at the rather precocious age of fourteen he abandoned his formal studies.

This retirement proved to be temporary, however, for after some eighteen months,

just as a high-spirited horse, long and well trained in war and long afterwards let out to pasture at will in the fields, if he happens to hear the sound of a trumpet feels again the martial appetite rise in him and is eager to be mounted by the cavalry man and led into battle; so Vico, though he had wandered from the straight course of a well disciplined early youth, was soon spurred by his genius to take up again the abandoned path, and set off again on his way. 56

Scholarly pursuits remained his all consuming passion for the remainder of his life. Indeed, in The Autobiography Vico depicts himself as an almost one-dimensional man. He records how he envied those young men who had access to stimulating intellectual company. He recounts how he was "inflamed with a desire to have knowledge" of Rene Descartes, how he was seized with a desire to study the Latin poets. 59

His obsession and enthusiasm for things scholarly is also evidenced by his constant revision of, and addition to, his works. Indeed, he suggests that all his major works were but a development and clarification of one idea, the idea which he first conceived and elaborated in confused fashion in The Study Methods. For Vico, scholarly activity was a way of life.

Although he completed no formal course in legal studies Vico's energies were first exercised in this sphere. Having applied for admission to the law courts, it happened by chance that a suit was brought against his

55. ibid., p.113.
56. ibid., pp.113-114.
57. ibid., p.134. Bertrand Russell comments on this intellectual isolation. It is unfortunate he says, that Vico never had the good fortune of meeting or corresponding with a thinker of his own stature. Wisdom of the West, London, 1959, p.206.
59. ibid., p.120.
60. ibid., p.117.
father. Thus it was that in 1686, at the tender age of eighteen, Vico, coached by Vecchio, prepared the case and carried the victory for his father. This victory did not, as one might expect, launch him on a legal career. Although such a career would have secured his financial position he records that he

had an ardent desire for leisure to continue his studies, and his spirit felt a deep abhorrence for the clamour of the law courts. 62

The Sojourn at Vatolla

After the successful defense of his father, therefore, Vico remained unemployed, abandoning himself "to the most corrupt styles of modern poetry". While engaged in this pursuit he chanced to meet the Bishop of Ischia who persuaded him to accept the position of tutor to his nephews at Vatolla. Thus began the second phase of Vico's life. He spent nine years (1686-1695) at Vatolla before he returned to live permanently in Naples.

The Vatolla interlude was a crucial period in the intellectual development of the young Vico. Caponigri claims that

... without these years at Vatolla the Scienza Nuova is inconceivable; both in its strength and power, and in its abundant defects and lapses, it is the faithful expression of the forma mentis shaped during this germinal period. 64

The sojourn at Vatolla served two purposes. It provided financial support - Don Domenico Rocca proved to be "a most kindly Maecenas" - and it presented the leisure necessary for the pursuit of his studies. Indeed, his omnivorous intellectual appetite was given free rein. Vico immersed himself in the humanities, especially in the works of classical authors. He devoured the Latin poets, Cicero and the Roman jurists, Lucretius and Epicurus, the Greek and Roman philosophers, read laws, canons and dogmatic theology. He did not preoccupy himself solely with ancient authors for it was at

61. loc.cit.
62. ibid., 118.
63. ibid., 117.
64. op.cit., p.14.
Vatolla that he became acquainted with John Locke and, through the plagiarysms of Henri du Roy, the thought of Descartes. It was at Vatolla that

Vico was pursuing other philosophical studies which were later to enter into dialectical conflict with elements of the new culture and was to lay the foundations of the vast, though less than flawless, erudition which was to provide the 'philological' dimension of the 'New Science'.

Perhaps one of the chief defects of The Autobiography is that Vico exaggerates his isolation during this period. He refers to the time he spent at Vatolla as "his period of solitude, which lasted a good nine years". He gives the impression that he was completely out of touch with all intellectual developments at Naples. This, however, is almost certainly not true. The Rocca's had houses in Naples and Portici and each year spent some time in Naples. During this period Vico matriculated from the University School of Law (1689) and also took his L.L.D. at the University of Naples (1694). In addition to this he was elected to the academy of the Uniti in 1692. He therefore had ample opportunity to be conversant with the new ideas percolating in Naples. Why then does he exaggerate his solitude during this period and assert that it was at this time that he began to elaborate his anti-Cartesian position?

The first part of The Autobiography was not published till 1725. By this time Vico's attack on the Cartesian position had reached the proportions of a crusade; he had become "the anti-Cartesian manifesto". Descartes is attacked throughout the work and the fact that it is written in the third person suggests Vico was attempting to counter-balance the "I" of the Cartesian "Cogito". Vico's anti-Cartesian position, however, only shows signs of emerging in 1708. Indeed, the Orations betray Cartesian sympathies and an approach that is anti-historical.

66. ibid., pp.119-132. Vico at first thought that du Roy was Descartes' penname.
67. At Naples.
68. A. Robert Caponigri, op.cit., p.16.
70. See H.P. Adams, op.cit., p.29.
72. G. De Santillana, 'Vico and Descartes', Osiris, 9, 1950, p.566.
The anti-Cartesian bent that Vico ascribes to his Vatolla years is therefore a transference from his 1725 position. In the interim Vatolla had become a pilgrimage in the wilderness, the equivalent of Descartes' sojourn in Holland. Vico's evaluation of his years at Vatolla has, it would appear, been coloured by later events.

The Professional Man

By 1695, when Vico again took up residence in Naples, Descartes had taken the city by storm. Although classical studies were in decline Vico continued to study Latin and the humanities. Despite this the Cartesian position which he had adopted during his Vatolla years must have been reinforced. From 1695-1699 he had no steady employment but lived in his native city not only a stranger but quite unknown.

Despite this claim we know that Vico did receive some recognition. After being invited to become a Theatine, a vocation which he 'learnt' was not to be his, he contributed to the San Estevan collection. In 1697 he composed the funeral oration for Caterina d'Aragona and in the same year suffered defeat for the position of town clerk.

In 1698 he entered the competition for the Chair of Rhetoric at the University of Naples and was successful. At first he had been unenthusiastic about the venture but finally allowed himself to be swayed by the persuasions of his friend, Don Nicola. It was to be his second and last success in what one might call practical affairs. Although the chair carried with it only a meagre salary - one hundred ducats annually - it still enabled him to marry Teresa Caterina Destito in 1699. Thus opened the third phase of his life, that of the professional academic.

77. Ibid., pp.133-134.
78. Ibid., p.134.
79. Ibid., p.135.
80. San Estevan was the viceroy who was leaving Naples.
81. Vico's failure in 1697 had sapped his confidence.
82. His only other success was the defense of his father in 1686.
As professor of rhetoric Vico had to present the inaugural lecture at the beginning of each academic year. This task gave him occasion to ponder the pedagogical methods of his day. In these lectures, generally known as the Orations, he developed his thought on pedagogy, and generally speaking, neither attacked nor defended the Cartesian epistemology.

The thoughts developed in these lectures reached their climax in the oration of 1708, a work which was published under the title of On the Study Methods of our Time. In this work Vico's anti-Cartesian bias and individual ideas began to emerge. He himself considered it an important publication for in his view

its argument is in fact a first draft of what he later worked out in his The One Principle of Universal Law, with its appendix The Consistency of the Jurisprudent. 83

The De Antiquissima appeared in 1710. The full title of this work is quite misleading for it had little to say of the ancient Italians but was rather an epistemological treatise containing a full blown critique of the Cartesian theory of knowledge. In it Vico spelt out in greater detail some of the implications of The Study Methods and elaborated his own much celebrated epistemological principles.

During the decade 1710-1720 he continued to read widely and came to admire above all, Tacitus, Plato, Bacon and Hugo Grotius; he produced no major works however. In 1720 the De Uno appeared and was followed in 1721 by the De Constantia Jurisprudentis. The latter is in fact an appendix to the former and so the two works are often referred to collectively as the Diritto Universale. It was this work which occasioned the comment of Le Clerc: in brief compass he gives us the principle eras from the deluge to Hannibal's invasion of Italy, for here and there throughout the book he discusses various things which took place in that space of time, and makes many philological [historical] observations on a great number of matters, correcting a quantity of common errors which the ablest critics have passed over. 85

In this work Vico had set out to reduce philology (history) to scient-

83. The Autobiography, p.146.
84. De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia ex Linguae Latinae Originibus Eruenda.
ific principles. It evoked its fair share of criticism from his Neapolitan colleagues but in his opinion none of their objections undermined the system itself; they had to do with small details, and for the most part they derived from old opinions against which the system had been designed. 86

As is often the case with an extremely radical work, Vico's *Diritto Universale* was incomprehensible to the critics. They read it with all their old prejudices and so naturally pronounced it obscure. Not surprisingly Vico observed that

the work suffered no other reproof than that of being unintelligible. 87

In 1723 Vico entered the competition for the morning chair of law. It carried with it an annual stipend of six hundred ducats, sufficient to have alleviated his chronic poverty. Vico was very confident about his chances for his hopes rested on his publications, his seniority in the university and his scholarship in general. On his own admission he was not a man of spirit when it came to practical affairs. In his preparation for the contest he had not taken 'academic politics' into account. The contest had been decided against him before it began. To save him further embarrassment one of his friends advised him to withdraw and this he did.

The Creative Thinker

The academic contest of 1723 was the turning point in Vico's scholarly life. He records that at this time he despaired "of ever holding a worthier position in his native city". It is 1723 that marks the beginning of the last phase of his life - the phase of *The New Science*. A. Robert Caponigri considers the events of 1723 a blessing in disguise:

freed now from all university ambition and delivered from the illusion that there remained for him any means of deliverance from the poverty and the humble social position which accompanied it, he returned to the subject of his meditations with

86. *ibid.*, p.158.
87. *loc.cit.*
89. *ibid.*, pp.163-4.
a heightened scientific disinterestedness and the resolution

to work out his guiding insights with no other concern than
the achievements of the revolutionary results with which he
felt them to be pregnant. 91

After the events of 1723, Vico's only consolation was the favourable
review given his *Diritto Universale* by Le Clerc. Encouraged by the latter's
lavish praise he once again set to work. Abandoning Latin, the language of
the scholars, he wrote in his native Italian. By 1724, *The New Science in
Negative Form*, a work that has since been lost, was ready for publication.

Vico describes this work as a critique of

the improbabilities, absurdities and impossibilities which his
predecessors had rather imagined than thought out 92

concerning the origin of the humanity of the nations.

Vico's misfortunes had not ended in 1723. His patron, Cardinal
Corsini, having paid a visit to his diocese, discovered hidden costs and
informed Vico that he would be unable to afford the publication of the work.

Undaunted by this set back he completely rewrote his manuscript, abandoning
the negative approach for a more positive and constructive form, thereby
vastly reducing its length. By selling his only valuable possession, a
ring, he was able to see his *Scienza Nuova Prima* through the press in 1725.

Vico was elated with his new work and claimed that in it he

finally discovers in its full extent that principle which in
his previous works he had as yet understood only in a confused
and indistinct way. 93

He interpreted Corsini's failure to see the negative form through publica-
tion as an act of providence for instead of a negative critique he had now
produced a positive interpretation of the "principle eras from the flood to
the Second Punic War". It was not the factual material of the work that
excited him but the new principles that he had enunciated:

he discovers new historical principles of geography and chronol-
ogy ... principles of universal history hitherto lacking ... a
metaphysics of the human race... 95

91. *op.cit.*, p.27.
93. *loc.cit.*
95. *loc.cit.*
Between 1725 and 1730 he wrote little of major significance except the first two parts of The Autobiography. In 1730 a second edition of the Scienza Nuova Prima appeared. Because of disputes with the Venetian publishers the work was totally recast and eventually published in Naples. Although this version differed little in conceptual format it contained a number of factual additions and omissions and so with the posthumous edition of 1744 it is generally referred to as the Scienza Nuova Seconda. Vico records that the 1730 edition was written in "an almost fatal fury", begun on Christmas morning 1729 and completed at nine o'clock Easter Sunday evening 1730.

This was his last important work and is usually regarded as his magnum opus. Vico certainly looked upon it as his crowning achievement:

... when he had written this work, enjoying life, liberty and honour, he held himself more fortunate than Socrates...

In this work the seminal idea contained in The Study Methods came to full fruition. D'Aulusio's evaluation of the author of this latter work as... no grubbing compiler but a man whose every page would furnish matter for others to spin out into large volumes seemed vindicated.

When he had completed the Scienza Nuova Seconda Vico regarded his other works, except for a few passages from the Scienza Nuova Prima and the Diritto Universale, as redundant. These earlier works were mere sketches of his magnum opus. When efforts were made to have his collected works published in a single edition he gave them to understand that of all the poor works of his exhausted genius he wished only the New Science to remain to the world...

Vico, then, was selective in his publishing activities for...

he thought the republic of letters, stooped under so great a pile of books, should not be burdened with more, but should only be offered books of important discoveries and useful

96. ibid., p. 194.
97. ibid., p. 200.
98. ibid., p. 148.
99. ibid., pp. 192-3.
100. ibid., p. 191.
inventions. 101

From 1723, Vico's life was one of poverty, isolation, illness and sorrow. The disappointments of his academic career were paralleled in his private life. His illiterate wife was "wanting in those talents which are required even in a mediocre wife and mother". Vico, it appears, played the roles of both Martha and Mary. A cause of grief was his son Ignazio who brought disgrace upon the family by committing some sort of crime. Added to this were his own failing health and the illness of his daughter Angela Teresa. In the midst of this suffering he received some solace from his son Gennaro, who, in 1736, began to assume some of the burden of his lectures at the university. He also delighted in his daughter Luisa who showed promise as a poetess.

Although he received some solace from his son and daughter, what really sustained him in the latter years of his life was unshakeable belief that he was a man of destiny. He had been destined to bring glory to his native city and to Italy by writing The New Science. In his later years, therefore, Vico came to consider himself, more and more, the victim of providence. A superior mind he concluded was guiding the course of his life. He considered that the manner in which The New Science emerged demonstrated that his intellectual life was bound to have been such as it was and not otherwise. 108

He saw in the events of 1723 the hand of providence for this failure prevented him becoming a slave to his profession and also denied him luxury, a state which Hazard has suggested is one of the greatest perils a man of ideas can be threatened by.

101. ibid., p.146. In his publishing habits he was definitely not of a mid-twentieth century mentality!
103. ibid., p.203.
104. Vico had never enjoyed good health. At the age of eighteen he was already suffering from consumption. See The Autobiography, p.118.
105. Gennaro succeeded him to the Chair of Rhetoric in 1741.
109. op.cit., p.412.
Corsini's abdication of responsibility was also interpreted as providential for it occasioned the *Scienza Nuova Prima*.

Conceiving himself as the tool of providence he became oblivious to the harsh comments of his critics, became extremely isolated and withdrew to his own 'ivory tower'. All his adversities he saw

as so many occasions for withdrawing to his desk, as to his high impregnable citadel, to meditate and to write further works which he was wont to call "so many noble acts of vengeance against his detractors". 110

During the last ten years of his life Vico composed several orations and completed the annotations for the third edition of his masterpiece.

His poverty was alleviated to some extent by his appointment in 1735 as Royal Historiographer to Charles III of Bourbon. Although he received a few such empty honours he was generally ignored, called a fool by some and an eccentric by the more courteous.

Vico died on the night of 22-23 January 1744, but his drama was not then concluded. On the day set down for his funeral a "great uproar" erupted between the members of the Confraternity of Sancta Sophia and the professors of the University. The professors claimed the right to carry the pall but the members of the confraternity denied them this privilege. Neither group would yield so the members of the Confraternity stalked out. The professors decided that they could not bury Vico by themselves so they too left. Vico remained; isolated in death as he had been in life.

Gennaro had him buried the following day by the cathedral chapter.

112. *See The Continuation of the Autobiography by Villarosa*, pp.207-8
In Chapter II I asserted that up until the eighteenth century the claim that historians could know events of the past had received no philosophical justification. I also contended that very few, if indeed any, philosophers or historians had thought about the epistemological foundations of history at all.

Philosophical activity is essentially thought of the second order. It involves not only thinking about an object in isolation but also reflecting upon it in relation to one's thought about it. Before the eighteenth century Western Europe had witnessed many scholars who had thought about the events of the past but there had been very few, perhaps none, who had thought about these events in conjunction with their thought of them. In other words there had been many historians but few philosophers of history.

The historian is interested in the events of the past simply as events. The philosopher of history on the other hand is concerned with them as objects of the historian's thought. The distinction is well expressed by Collingwood:

> The philosopher is concerned with these events not as things in themselves but as things known to the historian, and to ask, not what kind of events they were and when and where they took place, but what it is about them that makes it possible for historians to know them. ¹

Ages, the central problem of concern was the relationship between God and man. Consequently during this period epistemological theories were directed to the solution of theological problems. The sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries saw the rise of the natural sciences. At this time philosophers directed their energies toward defining the scope and limits of scientific knowledge.

If any statements of a philosophical nature can be said to have been made about the status of historical knowledge before the eighteenth century they were those of René Descartes. The criteria of knowledge which Descartes elaborated were, however, mathematical in nature. Consequently, within his model

... all knowledge which had not been or could not be reduced to clear and distinct perception and geometrical deduction was bound to lose in his eyes all value and importance. 3

History, therefore, as conventionally founded on testimony was excluded by Descartes from the mansion of knowledge. In his argument, however, Descartes was illogical. What he should have concluded was that history is not mathematics!

It was Vico who first fully appreciated the inadequacy of Descartes' position. The Cartesian criteria of knowledge had been too narrow. They served only to establish the epistemological foundations of mathematics and even that dubiously. As Collingwood has pointed out, there was a pressing need for

a principle by which to distinguish what can be known from what cannot; a doctrine of the necessary limits of human knowledge. 5

In the development of philosophy, a point had been reached when it was essential to devise a theory of knowledge that did not simply reduce all reality to mere objects of Cartesian epistemology and Galilean-Newtonian physics. This was Vico's contribution. His solution to this pressing

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2. For further discussion of this idea see R.G. Collingwood, ibid., pp.4-5. This account is, of course, very simplified.
4. See below, p.58.
5. R.G. Collingwood, op.cit., p.64.
epistemological problem must be examined in detail for it provides the theoretical foundation on which Vico’s investigation rests.

The Reaction to Descartes; The 'Verum-Factum' Principle

The milieu in which the Vichian alternative emerged was fundamentally a Cartesian one. Indeed, the earliest phase of Vico’s theory of knowledge takes the form of a direct criticism of an antithesis to the Cartesianism which had guided European thought for more than half a century, and was to maintain its supremacy over mind and spirit for another hundred years. It is no exaggeration to claim that the prime stimulus to Vico’s originality was the anti-historical bias of Descartes and it is against the background of the Cartesian critique that his thought must be appreciated and assessed.

It is generally agreed that until about the age of forty, Vico was heavily influenced by Descartes. Indeed, Max Fisch calls him "the greatest Cartesian of Italy". The appearance of The Study Methods in 1708 indicated, however, that Vico was dissatisfied with the Cartesian thesis. In fact the general tenor of this opuscula revealed the beginnings of what was to signify a radical change in Vico’s position. Although he did not attack the fundamental principles of the Cartesian school he did react against all its tendencies.

The Study Methods was a treatise on pedagogic methods in which Vico had occasion to criticise what he considered an illicit use of the geometrical method in the physical sciences. He suggested that this practice of his contemporaries only yielded a misleading appearance of demonstration:

... the principles of physics which are put forward as truths

6. Benedetto Croce, op.cit., p.1
7. See Ch.II.
8. See Ch.III.
on the strength of the geometrical method are not really truths, but wear a semblance of probability. The method by which they were reached is that of geometry, but physical truths so elicited are not demonstrated as reliably as are geometrical axioms. 11

Vico argued that geometry was demonstrable because man made it; if one were to demonstrate physics one would be able to make physical objects:

We are able to demonstrate geometrical propositions because we create them; were it possible for us to supply demonstrations of propositions of physics, we would be capable of creating them ex nihilo as well. 12

Since man obviously does not make physical objects to suggest that the propositions of physics are on a par with those of geometry was fallacious.

The implication in Vico's argument is that man can have real knowledge of something only if he can demonstrate it and to demonstrate something he must be able to make it. Hence, the earliest formulation of Vico's verum-factum principle appeared in The Study Methods, but in an essentially negative form. Although there was no direct attack on Descartes, this treatise marked the beginning of an elaboration of a new criterion of knowledge, very different from that of the Cartesians.

The direct assault was not long in coming for in 1710 the De Antiquissima appeared. This was a metaphysical treatise in which Vico launched a vigorous attack upon the Cartesian position and gave his own theory of knowledge explicit elaboration. His criterion of knowledge, that truth is identical with creative power, or that man knows only what he makes, he claims was known by the ancient Italians. Indeed, he attributes his whole epistemology to them for he purports to derive it from the Latin language. Despite Vico's claims, however, the work is little concerned with the ancient Italians and a linguistic derivation of the ideas while not impossible is open to doubt. Scholars have preferred to seek the origin of Vico's theory

11. The Study Methods, p.23.
12. loc.cit.
13. Vico would argue that artefacts are cultural not physical objects.
15. De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia ex Linguae Latinae Originibus Eruenda is the full title of the work.
in authors as diverse as Lucretius, St. Augustine, Bacon, Hobbes and
Sanchez.

Vico distinguished two types of knowledge; knowledge in the true
sense (scientia) and conscientia. Scientia involves a knowledge of the
causes by which a thing comes into being:

... scire is contendit esse, nosse causas, ex quibus res
nascatur... 23

In this Vico was quite traditional. Philosophy is often defined as the
discipline concerned with the most general causes and principles of things.
Scientia, the knowledge derived from philosophical investigation would
therefore naturally pertain to causes. Hence it is not surprising to find
Vico arguing that scientia includes a grasp of the genus or form of a thing:

scire enim est tenere genus, seu formam, quo res fiat... 25

If one's knowledge was of this type one had a grasp of truth, what
Vico calls verum. It implies that one's thought conforms to the order of
the real or external world and so is true knowledge.

Definivimus Verum esse, quod rerum ordini conformatur... 26

With true knowledge or scientia Vico contrasts conscientia. This
was the knowledge one had of something when one was unable to demonstrate
it. It was not knowledge of cause or genus:

... conscientia autem est eorum, quorum genus, seu formam
demonstrare non possumus... 27

As scientia pertained to the realm of the verum so conscientia per-
tained to the realm of the certum. The sphere of the certum was that of

18. A.A. Grimaldi, The Universal Humanity of Giambattista Vico, New York,
19. Isaiah Berlin, 'A Note on Vico's Concept of Knowledge', in Giorgio
Tagliacozzo, op.cit., p.373.
1953, p.2.71.
22. It is difficult to find an accurate English equivalent and so I retain
Vico's term. Perhaps "opinion" comes closest.
23. Opere, I, p.82.
27. ibid., I, p.81.
consciousness and was grounded in external authority:

Ut autem verum constat ratione, ita certum nititur auctoritate ...

It was not true knowledge but a state of mind; the effect of certum was to render a mind free from doubt:

Verum gignit mentis cum verum ordine conformatio: Certum gignit conscientia dubitandi secura. 29

The realm of the verum then, is knowledge that includes a knowledge of causes; verum is the product of scientia. The certum, however, is an effect of conscientia, a type of knowledge that does not include knowledge of cause and effect. Certum is a species of knowledge, therefore, which is, at best, psychological certitude. It is devoid of ontological implications for it merely expresses a state of mind.

It was on the basis of this distinction, the distinction between scientia and conscientia, that Vico launched his attack on the Cartesian epistemology. The cogito, Descartes had contended was the first step toward setting human knowledge on true and certain foundations. From this basis he had developed his arguments which purported to refute the sceptic's position. Vico suggested that on this point the cogito had completely missed the point for the sceptic does not doubt that he thinks nor does he doubt that he exists. It is not the possibility of conscientia that he denies but scientia - knowledge in a causal or true sense:

At quamquam conscius sit Scepticus se cogitare, ignorat tamen cogitationis causas...

Vico argued that the Cartesian cogito did nothing to alleviate the sceptic's problems. Descartes' thinking was not the cause of his existence, it was merely a sign of it:

Eminvero cogitare non est causa quod sim mens, sed signum; atqui tecmerium causas non est; tecmeriorum enim certitudinem cordatus Scepticus non negaverit, causearum vero negaverit. 32

28. ibid., II, p.14. History for example belongs to the sphere of the certum for it is based on testimony, i.e. authority.
29. loc.cit.
30. ibid., I, p.81.
31. loc.cit.
32. ibid., I, p.83.
In other words it is by the cogito that one becomes aware of one's existence; but it does not lead to knowledge of that existence. The cogito constitutes a basis, not of true knowledge, but of psychological awareness; not of scientia but of conscientia. Since the cogito pertains to the sphere of the latter anything deduced from it must remain in the realm of conscientia. Because one's thinking is clearly not the cause of one's existence it cannot form the basis of a scientific knowledge of that existence.

Clear and distinct perceptions cannot, therefore, be accepted as the criterion of knowledge for they are simply indications of psychological awareness. The virtue of Vico's claim is appreciated by Bruce Mazlish:

In terms later to be echoed by David Hume, the Neapolitan philosopher pointed out that the clear conception of an idea really equals only conviction. The vividness with which we perceive or conceive of something is not a test of its truth, but merely of the ardour with which we believe it.

Since Descartes' analysis was unacceptable Vico substituted a different criterion of knowledge. He considered that the knowing process consisted of demonstrating truths (vera) by their causes. Hence the knowing process was an active operation, not a passive reception of data. Knowledge involved demonstration, hence construction or the production of an effect:

"probare per causas idem est ac efficere". For Vico, to know something by its causes implies that one understands (intelligere) its composition, the elements that make it up. When one knows something one puts its elements together and so forms the thing:

Scire autem sit rerum elementa componere...

Vico considered that to put the elements of something together was the same as making it. The object of the knowledge process was truth (verum) and when the knower engaged in epistemological activity what was he doing but demonstrating or making truths. Hence in Vico's analysis truth was

33. See Antonio Corsano, op.cit., p.432.
34. See Benedetto Croce, op.cit., p.6.
38. Ibid., I, p.72.
made; verum was equivalent to factum. It is this epistemological tenet, Vico claims, that is evident in the language of the ancient Italians:

Latinis verum et factum reciprocantur, seu, ut scholarum vulgus loquitur, convertuntur... 39

The criterion of knowledge Vico adopted was that to know a thing one must make it; one can know only what one can make. It is this fact alone that defeats the position of the sceptic:

Nec ulla sane alia patet via, qua Scepticis re ipsa convelli possit, nisi ut veri criterium sit id ipsum fecisse. 40

The new criterion of knowledge had a number of implications both for the knowledge of God and of man. It confirmed the divine omniscience:

Deus scit omnia, quia in se continent elementa, ex quibus omnia componit... 41

It also explained why His knowledge was total, all embracing, infinite and exact:

Verum esse ipsum factum; ac proinde in Deo esse primum verum, quia Deus primus Factor; infinitum, quia omnium Factor; exactissimum, quia cum extima, tum intima rerum ei repraesentat elementa, non continet. 42

Human knowledge, however, was far less embracing. Indeed, in proportion as man lacked the creative power of the Deity, so his knowledge was limited:

Scire autem sit verum elementa componere: unde mentis humanae cogitatio, divinae autem intelligentia sit prorsus; quod Deus omnia elementa rerum legit, cum extima, tum intima, quia continent et disponit: mens autem humana, quia terminata est, et extra res ceteras omnes, quae ipsa non sunt, rerum dumtaxat extrema coactum eat, nunquam omnia colligat, ita ut de rebus cogitare quidem possit, intelligere autem non possit: quare particeps sit rationis, non compos. 43

Although man can be said to know physical objects in some sense of the word, Vico argues that it is not in the sense that God knows them: the Deity's knowledge is three-dimensional as it were, man's, one-dimensional. Since man does not and cannot create the physical world, his knowledge of it is

39. ibid., I, p.71.
40. ibid., I, p.83.
41. ibid., I, p.74.
42. ibid., I, p.72.
43. loc.cit.
44. loc.cit.
restricted to its outside, its extima. Man's knowledge of it is therefore not one involving cause or form (essence):

\[\text{Atque ob idipsum physica a causis probare non possimus, quia elementa rerum naturalium extra nos sunt.} \]

Man's acquaintance with the material universe then, was not true knowledge but something akin to conscientia. He could describe the physical world but he could not understand or know it. The material world was not a creation of man; it was therefore not in the sphere of the verum.

What man can truly conceive is not the essence of things, which for man is never completely exhaustible, but the structure and specificity of his own works.

For Vico, then, man could not have true knowledge of the physical world. Indeed, to the degree that a science or discipline was immersed in the physical realm, to that extent its propositions were verisimile (truelike), not verum:

[Cumque humana scientia ab abstractione sit, iccirco scientiae minus certae, prout aliae aliae magis in materia corpulenta immerguntur; uti minus certa Mechanice quam Geometria et Arithmetica, quia considerat motum, sed machinarum ope: minus certa Physice, quam Mechanice... minus certa Moralis quam physica... Moralis scrutatur motus animorum, qui penitissimi sunt, et ut plurimum a libidine, quae est infinita, proveniunt.]

It should be noticed that in this schema, history, as part of morals, occupies the most inferior position. On the other hand, mathematics holds the most elevated slot. At first glance, then, Vico's position seems somewhat similar to that of Descartes: the humanities are down-graded and mathematics assumes its accustomed place as queen of the disciplines.

The similarity, however, is only apparent. Mathematics is the science of the verum, not because its propositions are clear and distinct, but because it is a creation of man. Mathematics is not one in a series of disciplines, it is sui generis. It does not proceed by abstraction but is essentially synthetic in nature. Since mathematics does not possess physical elements it can be, and in fact is, wholly the creation of man.

45. ibid., I, p.91.
47. Opere, I, p.78.
48. ibid., I, p.96.
In *The Autobiography* Vico records how he

... discovered that the whole secret of the geometric method comes to this: first to define the terms one has to reason with; then to set up certain common maxims agreed to by one's companion in argument; finally, at need, to ask discretely for such concessions as the nature of things permits, in order to supply a basis for arguments, which without some such assumption could not reach their conclusions; and with these principles to proceed step by step in one's demonstrations from simpler to more complex truths... 49

Vico argued that mathematics is like a game, like chess for example. How does one know that the white bishops move only along the white diagonals? It is not a question to be decided by empirical evidence. It is simply a rule of the game that white bishops are to behave in this way - man made it that way. Vico considered that mathematics was very similar, for it too was totally fashioned by man. How does one know that a triangle has three sides? For the simple reason that man made it that way. 50

Since mathematics proceeds by a fundamentally synthetic method it was a discipline in which man created all the elements:

... Geometria, quae synthetica methodo traditur, nempe per formas, ideo tum opere, tum opera certissima est, quia, a minimis in infinitum per sua postulata procedens, docet modum componenti elementa, ex quibus vera formantur, quae demonstrat; et ideo modum componenti elementa docet, quia homo inter se habet elementa, quae docet. 52

Mathematics was entirely the creation of man, essentially a human factum. Therefore he knew both its intima and extima, understood its elements and so knew its causes. Mathematics therefore was the science of the verum, for when man engaged in mathematical thinking he was being God-like - he was creating:

Et ideo a causis demonstrant, quia mens humana continet elementa verorum, quae digerere et componere possit; et, ex quibus disposita et composita, existit verum quod demonstrant; ut demonstratio eadem ac operatio sit, et verum idem ac factum. 54

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50. For further discussion of this point see Isaiah Berlin, 'Giambattista Vico', *The Listener*, 28 September, 1972, p.394.
51. Vico considered that all other disciplines proceeded by abstraction.
52. *Opere*, I, p.86.
53. It should be noted that when Vico thought of causation he indulged a notion which included the four Aristotelian causes: efficient, final, formal and material. Since Descartes, most Western philosophers have concentrated exclusively on efficient causation.
Mathematical knowledge is true knowledge not because its propositions are clear and distinct, but because man makes them. Man does not have knowledge of material things because he does not make the elements of material objects:

... Arithmetica, Geometria, earumque soboles Mechanica sunt in hominis facul
tate; quia in iis ideo demonstramus verum, quia facimus. Physica autem in facul
tate Dei Optimi Maximi sunt... 55

Vico's theory of knowledge as elaborated in the De Antiquissima does not avoid a certain dichotomy in human knowledge. On his analysis, man could know only his definitional or nominal world; knowledge of the real world was reserved for God. Hence there are two seeming alternatives facing man: either he can orientate himself toward the material, in which case he can never completely penetrate the object of knowledge but only describe it in piecemeal and empirical fashion; or he can direct his ener
gies toward the definitional or nominal world in which he can achieve a complete insight into the nature and essence of the object of knowledge.

The De Antiquissima left the reader with a dilemma. Man was faced with a choice - true knowledge of an unreal world, or probable knowledge of the real:

... as far as human science refers to reality it is not certain, and as far as it is certain it does not refer to reality. 57

The solution to this dilemma appears in The New Science; indeed, the dilemma's dissolution is the new science. By asserting that historical knowledge meets the requirements of the verum - factum principle, and that it pertains to the real world, Vico solves the dilemma. History was the one discipline in which man had true knowledge of the real world.

In The New Science Vico extends man's creative ability, beyond the sphere of the definitional world, to that of the civil world. Indeed, he considers that

... the first indubitable principle ... is that this world of nations has certainly been made by men... 58

55. ibid., I, p.120.
56. See Ernst Cassirer, op.cit., p.53.
58. The New Science, 349.
Man's creative ability is thus no longer restricted, as it was in the De Antiquissima, to the nominal world of mathematics; man now creates the civil world, the world of history. Max Fisch has an excellent grasp of the change:

... whereas Vico had been a nominalist in his constructive theory of mathematics, the new science of history, though also constructive, has made a realist of him ... In the Ancient Wisdom, God made realities, and man in his most Godlike making made only fictions. In the New Science, man in his most Godlike making makes realities. 59

Since man's ability to know is directly proportional to his creative ability, the realm of history becomes a potential sphere of true knowledge. History belongs to the sphere of the verum because man makes it:

... history cannot be more certain than when he who creates the things also describes them. 60

For Vico, therefore, the propositions of history can lay as much claim to truth as those of mathematics. Indeed, history proceeded in a manner similar to mathematics except that it dealt with the real world:

Thus our Science proceeds exactly as does geometry, which, while it constructs out of its elements or contemplates the world of quantity, itself creates it; but with a reality greater in proportion to that of the orders having to do with human affairs, in which there are neither points, lines, surfaces, nor figures. 61

According to Vico's analysis the discipline of history fulfills the criterion of knowledge and, in addition contemplates the real world. As such, it was indeed a new science and takes precedence over mathematics for although the latter pertains to the sphere of the verum it does not relate to the real world. History is the only discipline that can lay claim to true knowledge of the real world. Since its propositions pertain to the sphere of the verum and since they also possess ontological content, the dilemma that had emerged in the De Antiquissima dissolved.

History, as the new science of the verum and the factum was the only discipline that presented man with knowledge of realities. In view of this

59. 'Vico and Pragmatism', p.413.
60. The New Science, 349.
61. loc.cit.
Vico expressed surprise that the scholars of his day cultivated predominantly the Naturwissenschaften rather than the Geisteswissenschaften:

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 or civil world, which, since men had made it, men could hope to know. 63

In The New ScienceVico brought to fruition his seminal idea that had first appeared in The Study Methods. Ostensibly, he has elaborated a new epistemology, one that justifies historical knowledge and presents it with a philosophical foundation.

Some Implications of the 'Verum-Factum' Principle

Although it is generally agreed that Vico's achievement was one of the first magnitude and that the verum-factum principle still finds favour with twentieth-century historians, the Vichian argument has been subjected to criticism. It has been asserted that the rôle Vico ascribes to providence implies in some way that man is not fully responsible for the course of history. If it is providence that guides the historical process and ensures the survival of humanity, in what sense can it be said that man makes the civil world. If man is only partly responsible for making it can he possess full knowledge of it?

The rôle ascribed to, and the exact nature of, providence in the Vichian theory of history has been the centre of much controversy. Perhaps the reason for this is that when Vico himself does mention it he is quite obscure and not always completely consistent. Suffice it to say that Vico's providence is not a transcendent but an immanent one, similar to Kant's 'ruse of nature' or Hegel's 'cunning of reason'. In Vico's scheme providence does not determine man's course of action and so man remains

62. See Enzo Paci, 'Vico and Cassirer', in Giorgio Tagliacozzo, op.cit, p.461
63. The New Science, 331.
65. See Ch.V.
67. See Appendix A.
fully responsible, the maker of his history.

Scholars have also pointed to problems arising from the relationship between the historian's making and knowing. Vico argues that before one can know something one must make it. Now granted that men make the events of history and that these men were other than the historian the historical process exists independently of the individual historian. If he does not make it, and it would seem clear that he does not, how can he know it? In what sense can the historian make valid claims to know what other men have made?

It is this observation which indicates that history does not satisfy the verum - factum criterion in precisely the same way as mathematics. In the latter the emphasis is on construction; in the former on reconstruction. Max Fisch's suggestion is not without merit:

the new science is like mathematics in being constructive, but the way in which it satisfies the verum - factum criterion is different. Men have made the world of nations; it exists; it is real, as the world of nature is and that of mathematics is not. Moreover, in making it they have in a sense made themselves, which they can scarcely be said to do in the course of making the world of mathematics. But the science of the world of nations has not come ipso facto and pari passu with the making, as it does in the world of mathematics. The new science comes rather with a remaking, a reconstructing...

If Fisch's interpretation is valid, and I see no reason to reject it, history satisfies the verum - factum principle because the historian remakes, reconstructs the human past.

The historian can recreate the past because he himself is both a part and a product of the historical process. The discipline of history is an activity which takes place in the human world. Consequently the remaking of the past not only represents but continues and is part of the first making. It is for this reason that Vico asserts that the principles of his new science are

... to be found within the modifications of our own human mind.

68. Vico's concept of providence is discussed at greater length in Ch.V.
69. 'Vico and Pragmatism', p.413.
70. The New Science, 331.
Historical events are products of human minds. Since the historian is also possessed of a human mind it is possible for him to know these events in the fullest sense of the word. In other words, what Vico is saying, is that what one man has made, another man can understand, if he takes the time and effort. The historian can recreate and so know what other man have made if he himself knows what it is to be a man. H. A. Hodges expresses it in this way:

whoever knows in himself what it is to imagine, or think, or desire, or plan, or resolve, knows the way in which this world is made. 72

Introspection, therefore, plays a large rôle in the Vichian theory. Vico views history as a form of communication. To communicate with another people necessitates both a knowledge of oneself and familiarity with the artefacts of the culture under consideration. It is only by adopting the mental attitude of the maker that the historian can fully understand and so know the events of history. Stanley Diamond expresses this idea in excellent fashion:

... the absolute prerequisite of historical consciousness is an unrelenting exploration of the self as it does exist and may be imagined to exist. The facts of other cultures, the artifacts, mentifacts, and sociofacts, are the external phenomena, the indirect evidence which must be tracked down to their human sources. The conceptualization of another culture or of another period in history (the problem is the same) is the result of the interaction of the sense of self with the artifacts of another time and place. 73

If history was to meet the verum – factum criterion, Vico had to assume that human nature remains essentially constant. Manson has emphasised this point:

the principle on which the validity of the method of introspec-
tion rests is that of the uniformity or continuity of human nature. As the world of history has been made out of the modifications of the human mind in the past, so the world of history can be known by the modifications of the mind in the present for human nature is essentially always and everywhere the same. 74

72. ibid., p.442.
It is evident that the validity of Vico's constructive theories of history depends on an indissoluble connexion between knower and known. The theory assumes, in other words, that when man studies history he is studying himself: "we are able to know the object of the human studies because we ourselves are that object".

Vico's tenet that human nature remains fundamentally constant has initiated a great deal of comment. The concept denoted by the phrase "human nature" is one that does not meet with universal approval for it is a concept for which no suitable alternative has yet evolved. It can also be asked what is the precise meaning of constant. Perhaps the most serious objection is, however, that the belief that human nature remains relatively constant is only an assumption. This objection must be sustained but it must also be asserted that it is a necessary assumption. If human nature has not remained in some way constant, if there is no continuity within human nature, then communication with the human past is impossible and the labours of historians vain.

Although the verum-factum principle indulged a number of assumptions it was a momentous innovation. Its primary contribution was to establish historical knowledge on philosophical foundations. Since history is indubitably something that is made by the human mind it is especially adapted to be an object of human knowledge. Since man creates the entire fabric of the civil world, every detail of it is a human factum and hence eminently knowable by the historian.

It is worth emphasising that Vico's argument is merely a purported justification of historical knowledge. His principle does not imply that the historian knows but only that he can know in the sense that he has a capacity to know events of the human past. Actual knowledge of these events is the product of research.

A further contribution of the verum-factum principle is that it

75. H.A. Hodges, op.cit., p.441.
defines history as an independent discipline. History is no longer an ancillary pursuit but one that is valued for its own sake. Since it is the only discipline that can make valid claims to knowledge of the real world it occupies a unique position among the disciplines. It was this state of affairs that Vico saw clearly, and according to Ernst Cassirer...

... what he defended with complete decisiveness against Descartes, was the methodological uniqueness and the distinctive value of historical knowledge. 77

Since history is a unique intellectual pursuit it requires its own specific methods and peculiar procedures. The methods of mathematics are unsuitable since they pertain to an unreal world. Those of the natural sciences are equally unacceptable for they and history are irreducibly distinct:

physiology and physics are spurious models in the social sciences because they are concerned with a reality which man finds, not with one which he makes. 78

Vico's epistemology also isolates the goal of historical investigation. His assertion that the principles of history are to "be found within the modifications of our own human mind" indicates that the historian's aim is to recover human thinking, however different from our own it may have been... 80

The goal of the historian's knowledge is not human facta as such but the thought which has effected these facta. Human artefacts are only of relevance to the historian insofar as they tell him of man. It is therefore the task of the historian to concern himself with

... the realm of meaning and value, of intentions, goals, desires, aims, and drives that are specifically human... 81

If the historian has a grasp of these concepts then it is possible for

77. op.cit., p.52.
79. The New Science, 349.
him to know how the civil world was created. It is human thought, therefore, not things, that constitutes the historian's ultimate goal.

By defining the goal of historical knowledge Vico thus isolated a type of knowledge that had, until his time, been little stressed. It is not propositional knowledge, 'knowing that'; nor is it the knowledge that comes with the acquisition of skills, 'knowing how'. It is rather an experiential knowledge, the type of knowledge that is had by a participant but, not by an observer. It is knowledge in the sense of 'knowing what it is to be poor', 'knowing what it is to suffer'. It is knowledge in the sense of understanding. Vico, in the words of Isaiah Berlin,

uncovered a species of knowing not previously clearly discriminated, the embryo that later grew into the ambitious and luxuriant plant of German historicist Verstehen - empathetic insight, intuitive sympathy... 82

In addition to defining the goal of historical knowledge, the verum - factum principle also suggests the means by which it can be reached. It implies that the proper object of the historian's study is whatever has survived from past human activity - all human facta. All artefacts shed light on past human thought:

... in his fundamental principle he implied that not only truthful testimony by observant witnesses, but every survival of past human actions, is potential historical evidence. Mythologies and popular traditions which, taken at face value, are absurd, can disclose much to the competent historian about the thinking of the peoples who created them. 83

Vico's epistemology implies that all cultural material, anything that man has added to nature, can be helpful to the historian in his investigations. His verum - factum principle therefore justifies the procedure of the prehistoric archaeologist who attempts to recreate the world of prehistoric man from the silent remains, the dumb relics, that he has left behind. Given Vico's theory, the prehistorian is justified, for according to his (Vico's) analysis

82. 'A Note on Vico's Concept of Knowledge', in Giorgio Tagliacozzo, op.cit., p.375.
history was to be read not merely in books, but also in the countless traces man had left behind him in his pilgrimage down the ages... 84

Since historical evidence is not confined to written records Vico's tenets imply that the historian must be active. Stones, bones and unintelligible myths do not speak of their own accord. It is only when they are interpreted in the light of some suitable model that they reveal their secrets. Although stones and myths are potential historical evidence they will remain such until the historian makes them speak. The historian, then, has to approach his data in an active fashion. What he knows of the past will depend not only on the cultural phenomena at his disposal but also on his own creative or reconstructive ability:

a true knowledge of reality is possible for the human mind insofar as truth can be created by the human mind. The limits of knowledge depend on the limits of the creative faculty of man. 85

It is on the reconstructive element in the knowing process that the Vichian epistemology lays heavy emphasis. Historical knowledge does not consist of accepting in passive fashion the reports of witnesses and chroniclers. It is rather a reconstruction - the product of the interaction between the human mind and the artefacts from the past.

Vico's theory of knowledge, then, had two consequences of momentous import. It set historical knowledge on a firm epistemological foundation and so established it as a worthy intellectual pursuit. History could no longer be treated with the disdain of a Descartes.

Furthermore, it pointed the way in which the historian might approach his material. This was crucial to Vico, for his preoccupation was with a period of history for which there was apparently no direct evidence. Hence more so than had he been concerned with 'normal' evidence, he had to be active, to reconstruct, which involved building a model. Vico was assisted in this by his epistemological solution for it implied a dynamic conception of the historical process which he proceeded to elaborate.

CHAPTER V

A DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL

The Scope of the Model

The specific task with which Vico professed to deal in The New Science was gentile history from the deluge to the Hannibalic invasions of Italy. It was after the deluge that gentile civilisation began, for, according to Vico, it was only then that the bestial creatures, who were the founders of the nations, began to extricate themselves from total immersion in Nature. His aim, therefore, was to give an account of the origins of gentile humanity:

our treatment of it [gentile history] must take its start from the time that these creatures began to think humanly. 6

Since he intended The New Science to treat only of profane history, the prediluvian period played little part in his theories. When he did mention it, he accepted the biblical account as his guide. Generally, however, he made little comment on it and made use of it only to explain the actual existence of the 'men-beasts' who provided the initial stimulus to gentile history. Thomas Berry accurately assesses Vico's use of the prediluvian when he stresses that all Vico's reasoning on the absolute beginnings of history was only accidental to his consideration of that second beginning of history which took place after the flood. 7

By restricting himself to an examination of the origins of gentile history, Vico was able to escape the conventional limitations which confined the scholars of his day and yet preserve his orthodoxy. He could bypass the scriptural framework that had bound thinkers such as Hobbes and

1. By "gentile" Vico meant non-Hebraic. His aim was to deal with that history of which the Christian bible said nothing. In actual fact he concentrated on the antecedants of Greek and Roman history.
3. Vico's use of "nation" is discussed below. See p.78.
4. For Vico's definition of humanity see below, p.75.
5. i.e., the semi-human, semi-bestial creatures who initiated history.
Spinoza, and so treat of history in a secular and rational fashion. The
distinction between profane and sacred history removed the obligation to
interpret all history in terms of "revealed truths" and so he was free to
present an explanation of gentile origins in terms of non-supernatural
events. He was at liberty to use whatever explanatory models he consider-
ed most fruitful in explaining the historical data he had at his disposal.

History: a Two-Edged Process

The model Vico employed to account for his historical data was basic-
ally a progressive or developmental one. This conception of history was
a direct consequence of his fundamentally dynamic epistemology that was
examined in the previous chapter. Man could truly know only what he had
made. The only reality, however, which man had created was history, his-
torical reality. Since it was continually subject to creation, historical
reality was in a constant state of flux. To understand properly historical
artefacts, therefore, one must view them as evolutionary products:

the nature of things is nothing but their coming into being (nascimento) at certain times and in certain fashions. Whenever the time and fashion is thus and so, such and not other-
wise are the things that come into being. 10

In Vico's view, therefore, the nature of any cultural object or event
was not to be defined in terms of some immutable, eternal essence, but in
terms of its historicity, its place in space and time. To explain an his-
torical phenomenon was to give an account of its origin:

we explain the particular ways in which they [historical
phenomena] come into being, that is to say, their nature... 11

According to Vico, then, historical artefacts were characterised by their
place in the historical process. They could be properly interpreted only

8. I do not wish to imply that an explanation invoking supernatural causes
is irrational but simply that it is more than rational, i.e.,
suprarational.
11. Ibid., 346.
within their cultural context. Historical reality, as the process by which these artefacts were made, was therefore developmental in nature.

Vico argued that before the historical process began, man had been completely bereft of culture. He possessed no language, no social institutions, no customs, no laws; he was like the beasts of the field, totally immersed in Nature. Man, however, possessed the potential to rise above the natural world by making cultural objects. When the men-beasts of the post-diluvian began to do this, the historical process was initiated.

The historical process was therefore synonymous with the production of cultural phenomena and the emergence of civilisation or the world of nations. The latter had not appeared as a completed product - a gift of the gods or as Vico would say, "as a frog ... born of a summer shower". It was a human product and the result of a slow and gradual growth that was still occurring.

It was Vico's contention that the activity which had produced the cultural world was not only objective in its effects; it also carried with it subjective consequences - man himself was not left untouched. Indeed, it was Vico's belief that by making his language, myths, customs, laws - his culture - man had in a sense made himself. In the historical process man had generated his humanity:

we have set forth above in the Poetic Economy how the founders of gentile humanity in a certain sense generated and produced in themselves the proper human form in its two aspects; that is, how by means of frightful religions and terrible paternal powers and sacred ablutions they brought forth from their giant bodies the form of our just corporature, and how by the discipline of their household economy they brought forth from their bestial minds the form of our human mind. 14

Humanity was, in more than one sense, self productive. It is Vico's emphasi on this point that has led scholars to affirm that "the principle of the New Science is this: humanity is its own creation". 15

12. ibid., 1097.
13. ibid., 738.
14. ibid., 692.
In Vico's view the historical process was therefore not an order extrinsic and alien to man but one of which he was part. Indeed, it was an order in which he was totally immersed; an order in which he created "his own being in its ideal plentitude and its existential concreteness". Man was not a static being but one that evolved, and as such, a being that was not a finished product. Man was a finite being, possessed of intellect and will and with the potential to develop. He was "nosse, velle, posse finitum, quod tendit ad Infinitum". It was by actualising his potential that man could become himself. He was fundamentally a pilgrim being and in history he ventured on his journey toward his humanity.

Vico argued that the criterion of humanity was not biological form. He in no way suggested that human physiology underwent a radical change.

What constituted humanity was an inclination toward sociableness. Man's "nature has this principle property: that of being social". In this postulate Vico was in agreement with the classical tradition of humanism:

man's humanity is quintessentially his sociality, his power, that is, to generate, to sustain and to fructify the relations of community.

Sociableness, however, was not an attribute concomitant with the origin or creation of man. The creator had not embedded in him some eternal, unchanging essence; sociableness was rather something man himself acquired. Man had been created with the potential to become sociable, and hence human, but he had also been endowed with free-will. To thrust sociableness upon him would be to remove this free-will and so destroy him; he had to choose it freely. Werner Stark captures Vico's meaning:

because of his freedom, he could not be given sociality straight away, like the ant or the bee. Sociality had to be held out to him as a developmental goal, an ideal which the real could and would approximate if man in his freedom would only try to become

19. The evolution of the human body from its gigantic to its human form was a change within species, not of species.
himself, that is, if he would try truly to humanize himself. 23

Vico's historical process might therefore be termed two-edged. It was a dynamism possessing both an 'inside' and an 'outside'. The latter consisted of the procession of cultural phenomena; the former, the development of humanity. These orders did not process as independent, parallel movements but were organically related; the external realm conditioned the internal:

the order of ideas must follow the order of things. 24

In like manner the internal sphere set limits on the external:

governments must conform to the nature of the men governed. 25

The two orders, in fact, were merely the reverse and obverse sides of the one process. The progression of cultural phenomena was nothing more nor less than a reflection of the development of humanity. Man became what he was by fashioning the world of nations.

The Developmental Nature of the Human Mind

Since humanity was an historical acquisition, it followed that rationality was of a similar nature. The human mind was not a self-contained principle of motion. Indeed, to conceive of it as such was "to repeat in history the seductive fallacy of rectilinear inertial motion in physics". Rationality was not a constant component of the human mind but something which developed:

... men were for a long period incapable of truth and of reason.

Perhaps one of Vico's most fruitful suggestions was the idea that the logic of human thought could be reconstructed as it had manifested itself through the ages. He claimed that the human mind not only evolved but that it did so in a specific order:

25. Ibid., 246.
26. It is of passing interest that one of Gordon Childe's most popular archaeological publications was entitled, 'Man Makes Himself'.
Men at first feel without observing, then they observe with a troubled and agitated spirit, finally they reflect with a clear mind. 

Since he argued that the first men were possessed of a nature that was little different from that of beasts he postulated that the primordial human mind was dominated by the senses:

And human nature, so far as it is like that of animals, carries with it this property, that the senses are its sole way of knowing things. 

In the early stages of its development the human mind was immersed in the concrete, being in no way abstract or reflective. Only as the historical process unfolded did the rational or reflective component of the mind emerge and become dominant:

The human mind is naturally inclined by the senses to see itself externally in the body, and only with great difficulty does it come to attend to itself by means of reflection.

An analogy which Vico used to explain his theory was the knowing process. He argued that the operation of this process for the human race was similar to its operation in the individual. He took Aristotle's dictum - nihil est in intellectu quin prius fuerit in sensu - and applied it to the human race:

Throughout this book it will be shown that only so much as the poets had first sensed of vulgar wisdom did the philosophers later understand of esoteric wisdom; so that the former may be said to have been the sense and the latter the intellect of the human race.

A further analogy Vico employed to explain his postulated evolution of the human mind was the development of the individual. This comparison was to some extent a reflection of his pedagogical interests. In his professional career he had been in close contact with adolescents and was therefore in a position to appreciate the disparity between the youthful

29. ibid., 218.
30. ibid., 1097.
31. ibid., 374.
32. ibid., 236.
33. ibid., 363.
34. See H. Hodges, 'Vico and Dilthey', in Giorgio Tagliacozzo, op.cit., p.443
and adult mind. He was aware that the mind of the individual changed and
was led to suggest an analogy between its development and that of the
collective human mind, the mind of humanity:

Thus the first peoples, who were the children of the human race,
founded first the world of the arts; then the philosophers, who
came a long time afterwards and so may be regarded as the old men
of the nations, founded the world of the sciences, thereby making
humanity complete. 37

The 'Nation'

The nation was Vico's basic organisational unit. The dramatic
personae in the unfolding of history were not individuals but nations and
classes within nations. Although it was one of his more important and
fundamental concepts, he failed, as with many of his other basic ideas, to
give any precise definition to his use of the term.

His usage in The New Science suggests that it can denote any social
unit from a city state to an entire continent; Carthage, Capua, Numantia,
Poland and America are all subsumed by the term. In the absence of any
specific explanatory statement, one can only assume from Vico's usage that
he meant the term to denote some sort of cultural entity of undefined
magnitude and composition, perhaps a people, which constituted a cultural
unit. Although its exact connotation cannot be determined, one thing is
clear; the natural unit of historical life was the nation.

A Three Stage Historical Model

For heuristic purposes, Vico proposed that nations had evolved through

35. It is a salutary exercise to compare Vico's statements on mental develop­
ment and those of Piaget. See G. Lefrancois, Psychology for Teaching,
Belmont, 1972, pp.188-223.
36. The analogy of individual to species continues to be employed by educat­
ional psychologists such as G.S. Hall and Jerome Brunner. See
38. See ibid., passim. See also F. Yandel, The Eighteenth Century Confronts
40. See A. Caponigri, op.cit., p.118.
three ages or cultural stages: the age of the gods, the age of the heroes, the age of men. The defining characteristic of each stage in a nation's development was the mental patterns of the men who were active during that stage. Vico took the model, via Herodotus, from the Egyptians and adapted it to his own original usage.

The age of the gods had been preceded by the age of the giants which, strictly speaking, was not a stage within the historical model. The giants were "stupid, insensate and horrible beasts", not men in the Vichian sense. They were merely the matrix, the raw material from which history took its origin. They were not within the historical process but pre-historical, pre-human. They belonged to an age when there was no history, for they were totally cultureless, completely embedded in the world around them. They did not stand above nature but formed one with it.

The age of the gods denoted the first stage of the historical process, when man began to emancipate himself from the shackles of Nature and so to create his cultural world. During this stage of their development nations were governed by what Vico calls "the common sense of the human race". He defined this as

... judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation, or the whole human race. 46

During this first cultural stage the human mind had not become sufficiently reflective to discover itself. Consequently, man tended to explain all phenomena in terms of supernatural beings:

The first nature, by an illusion of imagination, which is most robust in those weakest in reasoning power, was a poetic or creative nature which we may be allowed to call divine, as it ascribed to physical things the being of substances animated by gods, assigning the gods to them according to its idea of each.47

41. See The New Science, 52, 173.
42. ibid., 374.
43. Pre-historical in the sense of being pre-cultural.
46. ibid., 142.
47. ibid., 916.
The age of the heroes denoted the second cultural stage of humanity. It was characterised by the explanation of phenomena in terms of heroes:

The second were heroic characters, which were also imaginative universals to which they reduced the various species of heroic things, as to Achilles all the deeds of valiant fighters and to Ulysses all the devices of clever men. 48

This age marked a development of the human mind for during this stage the causal activity of man was given some recognition in the explanation of phenomena. Although the heroes were considered to be of divine origin, they were also human:

The second was the heroic nature, believed by the heroes themselves to be of divine origin; for, since they believed that the gods made everything, they held themselves to be children of Jove, as having been generated under his auspices. 49

The first two cultural stages were therefore periods during which man explained things in terms of divine or semi-divine beings. The individual man was considered to play no role in the events which occurred. Consequently, as Jove was the initiator of the first stage, so Hercules, his semi-divine son, stood at the beginning of the second stage.

The age of men denoted the third and final stage of the Vichian model. In this stage the rational component of the intellect became dominant:

The third was human nature, intelligent and hence modest, benign and reasonable, recognizing for laws conscience, reason and duty. 51

By this stage the human mind had developed to a degree which enabled man to reflect upon himself and so impute causal activity to individual men.

Since culture in all its diversity was merely the external manifestation of mental development, it too, evolved through the three stages. The nations proceeded

... in all their various and diverse customs with constant uniformity upon the division of the three ages... 52

Vico's classification of all cultural material into three categories was

48. ibid., 934. See also ibid., 761.
49. ibid., 917.
50. ibid., 196, 200.
51. ibid., 918.
52. ibid., 915.
merely his way of emphasising this point.

Vico took special pains to emphasise that the proposed stages of his developmental model were not metaphysical straight jackets:

But, to leave no point of doubt concerning this natural succession of political or civil states, we shall find that the succession naturally admits of mixtures, not of form with form ... but of a succeeding form with a preceding government. 54

As the historical or cultural process was a gradual development the emergence of its stages was not marked by some abrupt change. Customs "do not change all at once but by degrees and over a long period of time". Consequently the stages of cultural growth are not sharply defined but merge into one another. Customs that are characteristic of the age of the gods carry over into the following stages, just

... as the mighty current of a kingly river retains far out to sea the momentum of its flow and the sweetness of its waters...56

All nations, Vico urged, follow the same path in their development, evolving through the three stages:

... in the course of the entire lifetime of nations they follow this order through these three kinds of commonwealths or civil states, and no more. They all have their roots in the first, which were the divine governments and from this beginning all nations ... must proce[d] through this sequence of human things... 57

Evolution through the three stages, however, is not a logical necessity. Vico presents examples of nations that failed to complete the course of their natural development:

Carthage, Capua and Numantia ... failed to accomplish this course of human civil things. 58

The failure of a given nation to progress through all three stages was a result, not of a breakdown of its internal dynamism, but of extraordinary causes in the shape of external factors. It was outside intervention that caused certain nations either to be terminated in their natural progress or

53. See ibid., Bk.IV.
54. ibid., 1004.
55. ibid., 249.
56. ibid., 629.
57. ibid., 1004.
58. ibid., 1088.
59. ibid., 1083.
not to pass through a stage of the developmental model:

... in the new world the American Indians would now be following this course of human things if they had not been discovered by the Europeans. 60

Although nations could be affected by outside influences, generally speaking Vico contended that each nation possessed its own inner dynamism and that this was little affected by foreign intrusions:

The natural law of nations is coeval with the customs of the nations, conforming one with another in virtue of a common human sense, without any reflection and without one nation following the example of another. 61

In view of this it is not surprising that the diffusionists were Vico's bêtes noires. The notion of diffusion was an error perpetrated by nation-alistic Greeks and Egyptians:

This error was encouraged by the bad example of the Egyptians and Greeks in vainly boasting that they had spread civilization throughout the world. 63

It was the diffusionist approach that had led to many of the mistaken beliefs about the remote past, an example of which was the fiction that the Law of the Twelve Tables had come to Rome en bloc from Athens.

Vico argued that each nation had its own separate, individual origin. Seldom has there been a more stubborn emphasis on the multiple and independent origin of cultures:

Indeed it will be one of our constant labours throughout this book to demonstrate that the natural law of nations originated separately among the various peoples, each in ignorance of the others... 65

Vico, therefore, was an "auto-inventionist". Any cultural invention - a god, a language, a law, a myth, a custom - was an indigenous emanation, not a borrowed tool. His argument demonstrating that the Roman Law of the Twelve Tables could not possibly have come from Athens supports his claims.

60. ibid., 1095.
61. ibid., 311.
62. See F. Manuel, op.cit., p.159.
63. The New Science, 146.
65. The New Science, 146. See also Thomas Berry, op.cit., p.130.
66. See F. Manuel, op.cit., p.151.
It implied that even where it was certain that one nation had borrowed from another, the receiver invariably took only that for which its previous historical development had prepared it.

The Dynamism of the Historical Process

The nations, in their development, took their dynamism from two sources - the human individual and providence. In Vico's view man is naturally a dynamic being. He is "nosse, velle, posse finitum, quod tendit ad Infinitum". Since man makes history, the dynamism of the historical process is an effect of the dynamic nature of the historical subject, man.

Yet, if the making of history had been left totally to the human individual, disaster would have ensued, for man is by nature selfish:

in all these conditions man desires principally his own utility. This selfishness is so dominant that, if left unchecked, it will precipitate the destruction of civil society and man will revert to his bestial state. Indeed, if it had been left to the individual alone the world of nations would not have emerged since social institutions put restraints upon selfishness.

Since the world of nations does exist, Vico argues that individual men are not the only source of cultural dynamism. A preserving mechanism also operates within the historical process, a factor which Vico calls providence. It is providence, working on the raw material at its disposal that shapes the world of nations:

For out of the passions of men each bent on his private advantage, for the sake of which they would live like wild beasts in the wilderness, it [providence] has made the civil orders by which they may live in human society.

The notion of providence plays a significant rôle in Vico's understanding of the dynamics of history. Indeed, he asserts "la Providenza e

68. Opere, II, p.22.
70. Ibid., 133.
primo Principio delle Nazioni". Without the action of providence the emergence of the cultural order is inconceivable:


... et sine Deo in terris nullas leges, nullas respublicas, nullam societatem; sed solitudinem, feritatem et foeditatem et nefas esse. 72

Consequently, any account of the historical process must take into consideration the workings of providence. The historian

... should know God's providence ... by which the nations have come into being and maintain themselves in the world. 73

Although The New Science in its totality was designed to be a demonstration of divine providence working in history, Vico's notion of providence remains somewhat obscure. Ostensibly it is a personal force for on most occasions he refers to it as "God" or "He". There are times, however, when he refers to providence as "it". The way in which he suggests it operates also gives rise to the possibility that it could be an impersonal force. Whatever the full implications of Vico's concept of providence, there is no doubt that it differs significantly from the concept of providence prevalent in the Middle Ages. Karl Löwith has gone so far as to suggest that in The New Science, providence has become as natural, secular and historical as if it did not exist at all. 78

In Vico's usage, providence is not the activity of some transcendent deity but a natural movement within history itself. It is a force which makes use of human conditions:

Since divine providence has omnipotence as minister, it develops its orders by means as easy as the natural customs of men. 80

As it was not transcendant and miraculous but immanent and natural, Vico

72. ibid., II, p.281.
73. The New Science, 5.
74. ibid., 385.
75. Opere, II, pp.21, 281.
76. The New Science, 1047, 1048.
77. ibid., 132, 1108.
79. Except in the case of the Hebrews.
80. The New Science, 343.
rejected all notions of providence as a deus ex machina:

The physics of the ignorant is a vulgar metaphysics by which they refer the causes of things they do not know to the will of God without considering the means by which the divine will operates. 81

Vico appears to use the notion of providence to explain the emergence of a pattern in history that is unintended and unforseen by the historical individuals who are pursuing their own private ends. Individual men make history but providence is responsible for the overall pattern:

It is true that men have themselves made this world of nations ... 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 wider ends, it has always employed to preserve the human race upon this earth. 83

Thus Vico argues for an historical progression that depends for its dynamism on individuals but which, at the same time is independent of any given individual. It has been suggested that reduced to its simplest terms, Vico's "providence" was perhaps but another name for the very operation of the complexities of human history which has often been subsumed under the concept of the "irony of history". 84

Divine providence is the dynamism afforded the historical process by humanity as a collective whole - "humanity is divine, but no man is divine".

Some scholars have suggested that the rôle Vico attributes to providence commits him to a determinist notion of history. This view, however, would seem to miss its mark for Vico himself refutes it in the conclusion to his masterpiece. After stating that providence is responsible for the civil world he immediately asserts:

That which did all this was mind, for men did it with intelligence; it was not fate, for they did it by choice; not chance, for the results of their always so acting are perpetually the same. 87

81. ibid., 182.
82. See Patrick Gardiner, Theories of History, Glencoe, 1960, p.11.
83. The New Science, 1108.
87. The New Science, 1108.
History is therefore an effect of free agents and is consequently not pre-
determined. It is the net product of the actions of free individuals who
have limits set upon their range of choices by other individuals. Samuel
Beckett seems to grasp the spirit of Vico's meaning when he states that
history

is not the result of Fate or Chance ... but the result of a
Necessity that is not Fate, of a Liberty that is not Chance...88

A second factor militating against a predeterminist progressive inter-
pretation of Vico's model is his notion of ricorso, a concept which Caponigri
has suggested is not only the most celebrated but also the most misunderstood
idea within the entire Vichian thesis. As Caponigri suggests, it is a most
difficult concept and one that has led some Vichian scholars to suggest that
he removed from history any notion of linear progress.

It appears, however, that the concept of ricorso applies only to in-
dividual nations, not to history as a whole. The ricorso is a providential
mechanism which comes into effect only when all other methods of preserving
a nation have failed. It is a radical return to the spirit of the nation
as it was at its origin, a regrouping as it were, an apparent regress before
an eventual progress. The eventuation of a ricorso is not a predetermined
or logically necessary occurrence in a nation's life. It is contingent upon
the individual nation.

Progress is therefore not an inevitable necessity at all stages within
a nation's development. The concept of ricorso removes from Vico's theory
of history all notions of necessary, unbroken, linear progress. He is there-

88. op.cit., p.7.
89. op.cit., p.130. The concept merits far greater attention than my brief
treatment of it here would indicate.
90. See Benedetto Croce, The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico, New York, 1913,
p.143.
91. See The New Science, 1103. See also Thomas Berry, op.cit., p.88.
92. Perhaps an analogy is that of a modern Christian advocating a return to
the simplicity of the Apostolic Church in order to recapture its energy
and vigour.
93. The New Science, 1106.
94. loc.cit.
fore neither a radical pessimist nor an extreme optimist with regard to the historical process, but a moderate.

Some Implications of the Vichian Model

Although Vico's theory of history embodies numerous and obvious deficiencies - unwarranted assumptions, unsupported generalisations, unverified hypotheses, obscurities and inconsistencies - its developmental nature has led scholars to recognise it as an advance in historical theory that is of great moment. According to Hannah Arendt, it is the concept of process pervading history that distinguishes, more profoundly than any other idea, the modern approach to history. It is this concept that forms the basis of The New Science and one that occasions David Bidney's appreciation of the Vichian contribution:

The essential point in Vico's thesis, and the one in which he most clearly anticipates modern ethnological science, is his conception of the evolutionary, social mentality of human societies and the corresponding stages of socio-cultural evolution. 98

Vico's developmental model had far reaching implications for the study of history. It militated against the pessimistic ideas of degeneration prevalent during the Renaissance and emphasised that a belief in a "golden age" was an empty conceit. With the exception of Jean Bodin, Vico was, perhaps, the first scholar of note to attack the idea that history had begun with a golden age. Vico's model also contradicted the commonly held view which attributed rare wisdom to "the ancients" and so conflicted

95. See Thomas Berry, op.cit., p.134.
96. It is not my concern in this thesis to present a detailed and critical assessment of Vico's model. See my Introduction.
100. The New Science, p.178.
with those opinions which sought to explain the origin of the civil world by means of a social contract. Given Vico's analysis, the complex activity implied by social contract theories necessitated a sophistication of mind which was completely lacking in early man.

Perhaps one of the most significant features of the model was that it laid the foundations for what may be called a cultural or typological approach to historical artefacts. According to Isaiah Berlin it is this method of procedure which lies at the basis of modern historical scholarship. The whole of our historical outlook presupposes that we can say intelligently and plausibly that something is typically 17th-century and not 13th-century, that something - a work of art, a phrase - is characteristic of the Renaissance and not of a Classical Greek or an ancient Hebrew point of view.

Vico not only laid the foundations of this approach, he also used it extensively in his own work. Nations had evolved through certain stages and each stage of that development manifested a distinctive character. Indeed, a segment of time within the life of a nation had a unique character since all nations were in a state of flux. Since a nation constituted a functioning, organic whole all facets of its existence were interlinked. Consequently an artefact carried the stamp of the society which produced it. In other words all artefactual material was culturally contaminated: the inseparable properties of things must be due to the mode or fashion in which they are born. By these properties we may therefore tell that the nature or birth (natura o nascimento) was thus and not otherwise.

The importance of the notion of culture for the historian cannot be underestimated. It enables him to say whether or not a given phenomenon is typical of a given society at a specific time. To take Berlin's example, it allows the historian to argue with some cogency that Shakespeare not merely did not write his plays in the court of Genghis Khan, but that it would be absurd to suppose that he could have done so, because the entire life of the court of

104. 'Giambattista Vico', The Listener, 28 September, 1972, p.397.
106. Ibid., 148.
Genghis Khan was incompatible with the language, symbols, outlook, society, the entire world, of Shakespeare. 107

Vico himself was aware of the potential of this cultural approach and many of the arguments in The New Science rely for their validity on the notion that nations form cultural unities. One of his most celebrated arguments, his rejection of the tradition that the Law of the Twelve Tables had been brought to Rome from Athens, was of a cultural nature.

A further significant implication of the developmental model was that it laid the theoretical foundations for the use of comparative material. If all nations passed through the same stages, the historian could argue from the known history of one nation to the unknown history of another nation at a similar stage of development.

Consequently the developmental model served to give some justification to Vico's use of the vast store of ethnographic material in the Germania of Tacitus and the contemporary traveller's accounts of the peoples of America, China, Africa and the Indies. The model also suggested that the observed activity of young children and peasants was an equally fruitful source of comparative material. If the analogy between the individual and the race was accepted the behaviour of young children would shed great light on the way in which early man functioned. Vico made use of all these sources and the comparative material which the model put at his disposal served both as a stimulus for his hypotheses and an illustration of his arguments.

The most significant and fruitful of Vico's concepts, however, was his notion that the human mind itself had been subject to development. Vico asserted that it was the failure of scholars to advert to this which had been

107. op. cit., p.397.
109. Frank Manuel suggests that one of Vico's key intuitions "was the association of primitive consciousness with what he had learned from direct daily observation about the psychology of children and the common people". See op. cit., pp.155-6. This association continues to be made by scholars such as S. Diamond, Ernst Cassirer and S. Arieti.
110. See The New Science, 470, 529, 584, 594, 671, 988.
111. See ibid., 375, 437, 536, 562, 658.
largely responsible for the absurd opinions which they had expressed concerning remote antiquity. It was only by probing into the modifications suffered by the human mind in its history that the historian could appreciate the full import of the relevant historical phenomena and so present an acceptable reconstruction of the past.

Since Vico's primary interest was the origins of civil society, the historical phenomena with which he was concerned were products of the infant mind of humanity. Before he could appreciate these phenomena as evidence he required some understanding of how the mind of their makers operated. Consequently, he directed his energies to an examination of the divine and heroic modifications of the human mind.
CHAPTER VI

THE POETIC MIND

The Problem

Vico's claim for *The New Science* is that it "comes to be at once a 1 history of the ideas, the customs, and the deeds of mankind". The content of the work, however, is not as universal as this statement would suggest. Although it elaborates a theory of historical or cultural dynamics which can allegedly be used to explain the origin, growth and decay of any given social 2 unit, Vico himself did not actually engage in an examination of the historical existence of a diverse array of societies or cultures. Indeed, the positive programme, or what may loosely be termed the empirical content, of *The New Science* is quite limited, both geographically and temporally.

Geographically, its widest limits are the ancient societies of the 3 Mediterranean basin. More particularly, however, he restricts himself to an examination of the societies of ancient Greece and Rome. Insofar as he ever engages in detailed analysis it is of these two nations that Vico specifically treats.

The temporal limits of *The New Science* are what Vico called the 'obscure ages' – remote antiquity. His preoccupation is the history of pre-classical Greece (Greece before the fifth century B.C.) and Rome during its pre-Punic 5 war period. He is therefore concerned only with the first two stages of their cultural evolution: the Greek ages of the gods and heroes, and the corresponding periods in Roman history. The age of men plays little part in any of Vico's positive investigations since he considered it the preserve 7 of the conventional historian.

4. I use the term 'nation' in Vico's sense. See Ch.V.
6. It should be noted that the ages denoted, not sidereal or global time periods but stages in the cultural development of individual nations. The Roman age of the gods, for example, was later in time than the Greek age of the gods.
7. For details of Vico's three stage model see Ch.V.
The materials which Vico used were not conventional historical records. He found the works of the celebrated Greek historians to be of little use for his enterprise if for no other reason than that they did not even purport to treat of the period in question. He also rejected Livy's account of the history of early Rome as unreliable. The absence of any suitable conventional source material led Vico to profess that it was his aim to proceed without recourse to any of the normal records:

... for the purposes of this inquiry, we must reckon as if there were no books in the world.

Vico took as his raw data the myths and language of the classical societies. He believed that these myths embodied factual content. The difficulty which confronted him was a problem of interpretation. What, if anything, did they signify?

Before the dawn of the eighteenth century there had been many attempts to make some sense of the myths handed down from classical antiquity. Most of these, however, had been a manifest failure or at least hopelessly inadequate. Scholars had used them to support such ridiculous hypotheses that the principles of interpretation could not be anything but invalid. This state of affairs had led some to argue that myths possessed no factual import, or alternatively, if they did, it was impossible to discover it. At the beginning of the eighteenth century it was evident that no satisfactory method for the interpretation of myth was available and until such was developed it would remain useless for historical purposes.

Vico believed that the key for a solution to the problem resided in an understanding of the mind that had produced myth. If the historian gained an insight into the structure and workings of this mind, myths, he argued, would become quite intelligible and it would become quite clear that they were factual statements of happenings in antiquity. As such, they would

8. Herodotus and Thucydides for example.
10. ibid., 330.
11. See Ch.VII.
12. See Ch.II.
shed great light on the history of the 'obscure ages'.

Using his developmental model, Vico contended that as myth was a product of the divine and heroic ages, it was the creation of a mind quite different from the modern mind. The first task confronting the historian of the 'obscure ages', therefore, was to enquire into the nature and operation of the human mind in its first and second time forms - the divine mind and the heroic mind. This enterprise became one of Vico's main preoccupations. He himself records:

This discovery of the myth-making mind has cost us the persistent research of almost all our literary life... 13

As the remark implies, he believed that his efforts were not in vain and that his venture was a success. Although he had made use of ethnographic material he asserted that the construction of explanatory hypotheses was the most significant factor in his method:

... metaphysic... has enabled us finally to descend into the crude minds of the first founders of the gentile nations, all robust sense and vast imagination. 14

His conclusion that the divine and heroic minds were essentially poetic in nature and operation implied that the myths and language of early man were poetic products. This discovery enabled him to assert that

... the fables were true and trustworthy histories of the customs of the most ancient peoples of Greece. 15

Vico's Theory of Poetry

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, poetry was considered a product of reflection, an intellectual activity which consisted in giving a metrical form to reflective thought. It was also generally accepted that the function of poetry was to give pleasure. It was deemed a play activity involving the manipulation of words and metrical forms for entertainment. Joseph Trapp, for example, writing in 1742 defines poetry as:

13. The New Science, 34. See also ibid., 338.
15. ibid., 7.
An Art of imitating or illustrating in metrical Numbers every Being in Nature, and every Object of the Imagination, for the Delight and Improvement of Mankind. 17

Early eighteenth-century notions of poetry can be summed up by Horace's dictum: "Aut prodesse aut delectare poetarum". Popular interpretations of the poetic spirit...

... considered poetry as either an ingenious popular expression of philosophical conceptions, or an amusing social diversion, or an exact science within the reach of everyone in possession of the recipe. 19

Vico found himself in radical disagreement with contemporary theories on the nature of poetry. He himself was no stranger to poetry for as a youth he had "abandoned himself to the most corrupt styles of modern poetry". The theory of poetry that emerges in his writings, however, contrasts sharply with the theories of his own day. He himself asserts the originality of his contribution in this sphere:

Vico, also in his latest works, was to recover principles of poetry different from those which the Greeks and Latins and the others since them have hitherto accepted. 21

Vico argued that the human mind is regulated by two arts: the art of topics and the art of criticism. Topics pertains to the primary operation of the mind and is grounded in the senses and the imagination. Its function is to render the mind synthetic and inventive. The art of criticism pertains to the second operation of the mind and is based in the rational and reflective qualities. Its function is to render the mind exact in its judgments. Vico contends that it is with the primary operation of the mind, the art of topics, that poetry must be associated.

Since poetry pertains to topics it is a synthetic, creative and invent-

23. loc.cit. See also Opere, I, p.124.
ive activity. It requires what Vico calls *ingenium* (ingenuity), an attribute which facilitates the art of association, an activity which relies on perception rather than rational reflection. Hence poetry depends on the senses, especially the imagination:

... poetic sentences ... are formed with senses of passions and affections, in contrast with philosophic sentences, which are formed by reflection and reasoning. 27

It follows that true poetry is a spontaneous and unreflective product:

"reflections on the passions themselves are the work of false and frigid poets". A further implication is that poetic capacity is innate. If one is not born with the facility it cannot be acquired:

In every pursuit men without natural aptitude succeed by obstinate study of technique, but in poetry he who lacks native ability cannot succeed by technique. 29

Vico suggests that the most important characteristic of poetry is its power to animate, its ability to give life to the inanimate:

The most sublime labor of poetry is to give sense and passion to insensate things. 30

He asserts that children, whose mental activity he considers is essentially poetic, are often seen to engage in this 'animating' activity:

... it is characteristic of children to take inanimate things in their hands and talk to them in play as if they were living persons. 31

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Vico's theory of poetry is his contention that poetry is an activity of great epistemological import; it is not a pleasant social diversion but a way of learning. He argues that it is nothing but imitation which is itself one of the fundamental ways of obtaining knowledge:

... the arts are nothing but imitation of nature, poems in a certain way made of things. 33

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25. *ibid.*, 495, 916.
29. *ibid.*, 213.
30. *ibid.*, 186.
31. *loc.cit.*
32. *ibid.*, 216.
33. *ibid.*, 217.
Vico asserts that this type of learning is evidenced by children for they "generally amuse themselves by imitating what they are able to understand".

For Vico, poetry is essentially a making or doing activity. In this contention he was undoubtedly influenced by the Greek verb ποιεῖν for he asserts that it is from this term that the word "poet" is derived. Since the making of something implies a complete knowledge of it, poetic activity is an epistemic pursuit par excellence. It is this epistemological aspect which Enzo Paci maintains is crucial for a proper understanding of the Vichian notion of poetry:

We note also that Vico speaks of poetry as imitation. Here, too, we risk missing his meaning if we think of poetry as poetic works and not as poiein. It is not a question of poetry as it would be understood by a poet. It is a question of learning; children learn by operations and from examples and not from exact results.

Vico's theory of poetry has been the object of numerous extravagant statements. Benedetto Croce, for example, sees it as "a bold and revolutionary innovation" while Herbert Read goes so far as to assert that it was Vico who first penetrated the true nature of poetry. George De Santillana is equally lavish in his praise:

At a time when Pope and Voltaire were turning out polished couplets which they thought to be poetry, he [Vico] was able to tell them why it could not be considered poetry by any standard.

The 'Primitive' Mind

Although Vico's theory of poetry is of interest in its own right its relevance to this discussion lies in the use to which he put it. His poetic theory afforded him his first insight into the workings of the 'primitive' mind. Given the traditional notion of poetry, the poetic spirit is pecul-

34. ibid., 215.
35. ibid., 376.
36. See Ch.IV.
38. The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico, New York, 1913, p.47.
39. Ibid., p.118.
40. 'Vico and Descartes', Osiris, 9, 1950, p.579.
iarly indicative of the third time form of the human mind - the reflective stage or age of man. Vico's analysis, on the other hand, indicates that poetry is to be associated with the primitive, inceptive and spontaneous stage of mental development. It is from this premiss that he concludes that the operation of the primitive mind is similar to that of the poetic mind.

Hence Caponigri's evaluation:

... his [Vico's] sensitivity to the problems of poetics ... afforded the first glimpse into the qualitative and dynamic structure of the primordial moment of the temporal-ideal process of history... 42

In arguing that the 'primitive' mind was poetic, Vico appealed both to speculative and empirical considerations. Using his analogy of individual development he conjectured that the human mind in its earliest stages of growth was completely dominated by the senses:

And human nature, so far as it is like that of animals, carries with it this property, that the senses are its sole way of knowing things. 44

Granted this proposition, man at this stage of his development was incapable of abstract or reflective thought:

They had only the bare potentiality, and that torpid and stupid, of using the human mind and reason. 45

Because of its immersion in the senses the 'primitive' mind was restricted to the particular and the concrete; general or universal concepts were beyond it. It also followed that the mind of early man was dominated by a strong imagination:

Imagination is more robust in proportion as reasoning power is weak. 47

This theory limited primitive man's mental apparatus to topics; criticism was beyond him. His thought, therefore, could only be poetic.

A further reason for postulating the poetic nature of the 'primitive'

41. For elaboration see A.R. Caponigri, op.cit., p.165.
42. ibid., p.164.
43. See Ch.V.
44. The New Science, 374.
45. ibid., 6.
46. ibid., 700, 703.
47. ibid., 185.
mind was that during the early stages of development "all things necessary
to human life had to be invented". Consequently, the art of topics dom-
inated the human mind in its infancy for the art of criticism presupposes
the existence of those things it judges:

Providence gave good guidance to human affairs when it aroused
human minds first to topics rather than to criticism, for
acquaintance with things must come before judgment of them. 49

Perhaps the greatest single stimulus to his views on the nature of the
'primitive' mind came from his observation of children. Vico considered
that their behaviour was indicative of great imagination, manifested a
tendency to imitate what they understood and displayed a distinct inclinat-
ion to animate the inanimate. This type of behaviour he considered was
essentially poetic. Since he had argued that the mental structures of a
child were similar to those of primitive man, he conjectured that there was
good reason for considering the primitive mind also poetic.

Apart from these theoretical considerations, Vico claimed there were
firm empirical grounds for asserting the poetic nature of the primitive
mind. He cited ten examples of ancient nations whose early history was
written in verse, concluding that all accounts were in poetic form. Vico
saw two alternative explanations for this phenomenon. Either these records
expressed reflective thought in a poetic form or their content was also
poetic. Given Vico's developmental model the former hypothesis was unten-
able since it denied to the human mind, at that stage of its development,
the sophistication necessary to make it capable of making the distinction
between content and form. Vico therefore argued that as "all barbarian
histories have fabulous beginnings" primitive man himself was fundamentally
poetic:

... we may truly say that the first age of the world occupied

49. *loc.cit*.
50. See *ibid.*, 211, 215, 186.
51. See Ch.V.
itself with the primary operation of the human mind.

Since he concluded that the mind of early man was unquestionably poet­
ic, poetry became Vico's defining term of the inner quality of the first two
stages of cultural development. Caponigri's comment is quite justified:

... poetic becomes the adjective by which he designates and
describes the whole pre-reflective life of man, comprising
both its gnoseological and its volitive movements, and be­
comes, most properly of all, the designation of that wisdom
which is the concrete synthesis and expression of that pre­
reflective life. 55

Hence the poetry of the ancients was sublime because it was the pro­
duct of a deficiency of reason; it was the fruit of almost pure sense
activity:

... because it was quite corporeal, they did it with marvellous
sublimity... 56

It came naturally to them since "they were furnished by nature with these
senses and imaginations". Furthermore, it was born of necessity since
early man was incapable of reflective thought.

The 'Primitive's' Notion of Causation

In accord with his tenet that poetic activity is an epistemological
endeavour, Vico asserted that the poetry of the ancients expressed their
wisdom or knowledge. Since the latter was poetic it was based on a poetic
appreciation of the environment:

... poetic wisdom, the first wisdom of the gentile world, must
have begun with a metaphysic not rational and abstract like that
of learned men now, but felt and imagined as that of those first
men must have been, who, without power of ratiocination, were
all robust sense and vigorous imagination... 60

It followed that the mind in its earliest stages of development was
characterized by its ignorance of causes, or, perhaps more accurately, by a

54. ibid., 496.
55. op.cit., pp.166-7.
56. The New Science, 376.
57. ibid., 375.
58. ibid., 34.
59. ibid., 375.
60. loc.cit.
poetic appreciation of causation. Hence, although early man was aware of the phenomena occurring in nature, unusual sights immediately aroused his curiosity much as similar events perturbed the peasant of Vico's day. In his attempt to understand these occurrences, ancient man attributed them with his own nature:

When men are ignorant of the natural causes producing things, and cannot even explain them by analogy with similar things, they attribute their own nature to them. 63

He found support for this contention from his observation of the common people:

When they wonder at the prodigious effects of the magnet on iron ... they come out with this: that the magnet has an occult sympathy for the iron... 64

Hence Vico asserted that early man's notion of causality was essentially anthropomorphic. He did not think in terms of abstract forces but in terms of the particular and the concrete. Primitive man did not really enquire into the cause of an event; he sought an understanding of its meaning or purpose. Hence the poetic notion of causation is teleological rather than efficient. Phenomena occur because they are willed by someone for some purpose:

... as rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them ... this imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by not understanding them ... and perhaps the latter proposition is truer than the former, for when man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he takes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them. 65

Vico contended that by this method of learning ancient man made of all nature a vast animate body which felt passions and experienced stimuli. His ignorance thus led him to attribute substantial and animate existence to abstract forces:

... they gave the things they wondered at substantial being after

61. loc.cit.
62. ibid., 377.
63. ibid., 180.
64. ibid., 377.
65. ibid., 405.
66. ibid., 377.
their own ideas, just as children do... 67

Because many of the phenomena they observed appeared to be so wonderful, ancient man interpreted them as the activity of superhuman or divine beings. In this fashion the gods and heroes of classical myth were created; they were primitive man's causes:

The same theological poets gave living and sensible and for the most part human forms to the elements and to the countless special natures arising from them, and thus created many and various divinities... 68

Vico found support for this aspect of his theory in ethnographic analogy, in the reported activity of the American Indians:

This is now confirmed by the American Indians, who call gods all the things that surpass their small understanding. 69

Poetic Universals

Not only was primitive man's appreciation of causation limited by his poetic mind; his attempts to form class concepts were similarly controlled. According to Vico, the tendency to form universals is innate:

The human mind is naturally impelled to take delight in uniformity. 70

In the primitive state, however, it cannot arrive at this 'uniformity' by means of logical abstraction in the Aristotelian sense since it is dominated by the senses and so confined to the concrete and the particular. Since intelligible class concepts are beyond its reach, it proceeds according to the dynamics of poetry and creates a concrete or phantasmic universal:

When they could not achieve this class concept by logical abstraction, they did it by imaginative representation. 71

This imaginative or phantasmic universal, what Vico calls a poetic character, is before all else an image, concrete and particular, formed by means of association. He had observed that children tend to form their
first concepts in this fashion:

The nature of children is such that by the ideas and names associated with the first men, women and things they have known, they afterwards apprehend and name all the men, women and things which have any resemblance or relation to the first.72

Hence Vico contends that the poetic character is formed in a similar fashion, as a product of the poverty of the rational powers of the 'primitive' mind:

Just so the Egyptians reduced to the genus "civil sage" all their inventions useful or necessary to the human race which are particular effects of civil wisdom, and because they could not abstract the intelligible genus "civil sage", much less the form of the civil wisdom in which these Egyptians were sages, they imagined it forth as Hermes Trismegistus. 73

Vico asserts that in most instances poetic universals take the form of animate beings, gods or heroes, to whom all activity within a specific area is attributed:

To these poetic universals they reduced all the particular species belonging to each genus, as to Jove everything concerning the auspices, to Juno everything touching marriage. 74

The poetic characters are primitive man's attempt to classify the objects of his environment; the result of his efforts to put order in his universe; his attempt to name and so gain knowledge. This type of epistemological activity prepares the way for the more abstract forms of reasoning that emerge as the human mind develops:

These imaginative genera, as the human mind later learned to abstract forms and properties from subjects, passed over into intelligible genera, which prepared the way for the philosophers.75

Vico contended that all men in the first two stages of human development thought in this fashion. During both the age of the gods and the age of the heroes causation and concepts were poetic. The distinction between the two stages was that in the former, causes and attributes were personified as gods, whereas in the latter, they were particularised as heroes.

72. Ibid., 206.
73. Ibid., 209.
74. Ibid., 933.
75. Ibid., 934.
The Significance of Vico's Theory of 'Primitive' Mentality

Vico's theory of primitive mentality has not gone unnoticed by a number of modern scholars. H. A. Hodges, for example, is full of praise for his accomplishment in this area:

It is Vico's great achievement to have conceived a "logic" of imaginative thinking and to have worked it out, not merely as an aspect of aesthetics ... but as an analysis of the way in which early civilizations talk about all their concerns. 76

Although it is not difficult to criticise the detailed aspects of Vico's account of primitive mentality - it assumes that all primitive men are possessed of the same type of mind; the analysis is too broad and generalised - to a great extent its broad outlines have been supported by twentieth-century psychologists, philosophers and some anthropologists. It should be noted, however, that they do not suggest that Vico was influential in the formation of their own views and many do not even make mention of him. Others have developed hypotheses that are similar to his and have pointed to the fact that he entertained like notions but that they reached their conclusions independently.

The similarity of certain aspects of Vico's theory to the conclusions of Kurt Goldstein is evident. The latter writes that his study of psychologically abnormal patients has led him to suspect that primitive peoples think and act in a concrete fashion:

From my experience with the behaviour of patients, I guessed that the people in primitive societies may not be inferior, but that their behaviour may correspond to what we have characterized as concrete behaviour. 77

Suggestions of a similar nature have been made by Silvano Arieti, a fellow psychologist who isolates several stages in the development of the individual mind. He uses the term "paleological" to denote the stage which precedes the one which manifests the structures of Aristotelian logic. This

76. 'Vico and Dilthey', in Giorgio Tagliacozzo, op. cit., p.445.
stage is a level of mental operation which is not pre- or illogical but logical in a different sense. It is the level at which the minds of young children and primitive man operate.

Arieti argues that at the paleological level the mind is capable of some abstraction but that this art is "far from complete". Universals produced by a mind at this level are products of sense activity:

At the paleologic level the individual starts to think categorically or in terms of classes. But these categories are not reliable; being primary classes, they are at the mercy of emotions. 80

He also alleges that the 'paleologic mind' always accounts for causation in anthropomorphic concepts:

The person who thinks exclusively paleologically can ask himself why certain things happen; but the answer he gives is always an anthropomorphic or personal one. He thinks of all events as being determined by the will of men or by anthropomorphized forces. 81

It is this level of mental activity which Arieti considers characterises primitive peoples:

Phylogenetically, the paleologic world corresponds in many ways to the mythical world of ancient people and to some cultural institutions of various aboriginal societies today. 82

It is of interest that Arieti pays Vico the tribute of being the first to appreciate that the 'primitive' mind functions in this way.

Arieti's conclusions on the nature of poetry and creativity, and the insight they provide into the operation of the primitive mind also correspond closely with those of Vico. He argues that creativity ... to a considerable extent consists of ancient, obsolete mental mechanisms, generally relegated to the recesses of the psyche where the primary process prevails. 84

Poetic activity, he maintains, manifests substantial use of these mechanisms for poetry relies fundamentally on metaphor, the exploitation of which cannot

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79. ibid., p.122.
82. ibid., p.122.
83. ibid., pp.122-3
85. ibid., p.376.
be learnt from others. To be master of the metaphor, he argues, is a sign of genius and implies an intuitive rather than a reflective means of perception. True poetic activity employs vivid imagery and embodies phantasmic concepts.

Poetry, Arieti asserts, manifests a significant paleologic element. It is not surprising, therefore, that he considers it typical of very ancient man and young children:

In very primitive people and in children, the perceptual qualities of things have not yet been muffled by the enormous expansion of cognitive processes. 88

It is the growth of the mental faculties, he believes, which has dulled the vividness of perception and it is for this reason that modern man has largely lost the poetic faculty. In this he both acknowledges and agrees with Vico:

As Giambattista Vico (1725) described, very ancient people resorted to this type of thinking /poetic/ more than modern people, because in ancient times abstract concepts were not yet developed to a high degree. 89

Ernst Cassirer is another who elaborates views on primitive consciousness which are similar to Vico's, although much more detailed. Despite his scant reference to the latter in his The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Cassirer's analysis of mythical thought is strongly reminiscent of Vico for he argues that primitive consciousness is completely dominated by sense impressions and is consequently unreflective:

This mythical consciousness lives in the immediate impression, which it accepts without measuring it by something else. 90

It is the sense impression which takes absolute priority and gives to primitive man his entire grasp of reality:

For the mythical consciousness the impression is not merely relative but absolute; the impression is not through something else and does not depend on something else as its condition; on the contrary it manifests and confirms itself by the simple intensity of its presence, by the irresistible force with which it impresses

86. ibid., p.373. Cf. above p.95.
87. ibid., p.381.
88. ibid., p.401.
89. ibid., pp.408-9.
itself upon consciousness. 91

Cassirer urges that it is its conception of causation that distinguishes mythical thinking from abstract or scientific thought. While the scientific mind seeks an account of causation in universal or general terms, the primitive mind restricts itself to the particular event. This latter type of consciousness entertains no notion of chance; every event is caused for some reason. Hence it substitutes a law of purpose for the law of causation:

Myth ... begins with the intuition of purposive action - for all the forces of nature are for myth nothing other than expressions of a demonic or divine will. 93

Mythical consciousness therefore views causation in terms of personified substances, not of dynamic relations:

Throughout mythical thinking we encounter a hypostatization of properties and processes, or forces and activities, often leading to their immediate materialization. 94

Cassirer maintains that primitive consciousness, like all human consciousness, attempts to order its environment for the purpose of understanding it. For the mythical mind this endeavour results in the formation, not of abstract categories, but concrete ones:

The world becomes more intelligible in proportion as its parts are assigned to the various gods, as special spheres of material reality and human activity are placed under the guardianship of particular deities. 95

By means of these "concrete unifying images" the 'primitive' mind puts structure and order into its environment. While the logical class divides and unites at the same time, the mythical category simply "binds particulars together in the unity of an image, a mythical figure".

Vico's beliefs concerning primitive consciousness also find parallels in the work of twentieth-century anthropologists. The French scholar, Lévy-Bruhl, while not enjoying high repute in the British school, subscribes to an
analysis of primitive modes of thinking which is not unlike that advanced
by Vico. He asserts that the primitive mind is 'prelogical':

It is not antilogical; it is not alogical either. By designating it "prelogical" I merely wish to state that it does not
bind itself down, as our thought does, to avoiding contradiction. 100

Levy-Bruhl argues that the 'prelogical' mind is fundamentally synthetic in its operations, evidences substantial use of memory and is dominated
by the emotions. He also asserts that it gives little indication of an
aptitude for abstract thinking:

In short, the entire mental habit which rules out abstract thought and reasoning, properly so-called, seems to be met with in a large
number of uncivilized communities, and constitutes a characteristic and essential trait of primitive mentality. 103

He is led to the conclusion that the prelogical mind is capable of
unifying activity but that its categories are a product of memory rather than
of abstraction:

The slightest mental effort involving abstract reasoning, however elementary it may be, is so distasteful to them that they immedia-
tely declare themselves tired and give it up. We must admit therefore, as we have already said, that with them memory takes
the place ... of operations which elsewhere depend upon a logical process. 104

Consequently its categories are concrete and phantasmic, this lack of conceptual thinking being manifest in the languages of undeveloped peoples. The
'primitive' mind's

... collective representations [categories] are always largely emotional. The primitive's thought and his language are but slightly conceptual, and it is in this respect that the distance which separates his mind from ours may perhaps most easily be
estimated. 105

Levy-Bruhl is also of the opinion that the notion of causation held by
primitive peoples is essentially anthropomorphic. He asserts that they

99. The most significant difference is that Levy-Bruhl denies mental development at the phylogenetic level.
101. ibid., p.108.
104. How Natives Think, p.115.
entertained no idea of secondary causality, ascribing the true cause of some
106
event to an unseen power, to someone "above and beyond what we call Nature".
Hence they refer all events to the intervention of some animate being:
The fact is that the primitive ... never troubles to enquire into
107
causal connections which are not self-evident, but straightway
refers them to a mystic power. 107
It has been suggested that Lévy-Bruhl's theories are somewhat extreme.
Hence it is not surprising that more moderate interpretations of primitive
consciousness have been forthcoming in recent years. Claude Lévi-Strauss,
for example, maintains that the structure of mythical thought lies halfway
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between percepts and concepts. Although he considers the 'primitive' mind
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synthetic and creative, he also asserts that it is analytic to some extent.
He argues that the evidence gleaned from the languages of undeveloped peoples
does not warrant the assumption that they are incapable of abstract thought.
Opinions which suggest that primitive peoples are completely bereft of con­
cepts, Lévi-Strauss dismisses as a product of unbalanced use of the evidence.
Although there are cases
... cited as evidence of the supposed ineptitude of primitive
people for abstract thought, other cases are at the same time
ignored which make it plain that richness of abstract words is
not a monopoly of civilized languages. 111
His contentions are supported by the findings of A. A. Hill, an American
linguist, who, in 1952, exploded "the myth that there is no single term for
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'washing' in Cherokee". It would appear, then, that there are grounds for
believing that undeveloped consciousness is not as restricted to the concrete

106. ibid., p.438.
110. ibid., pp.236, 252.
111. ibid., p.1.
112. See Stephen Ullman, 'Semantic Universals', in Joseph H. Greenberg,
Universals of Language, Cambridge, 1963, p.181. If the curious patterns
(tectiforms, penniforms, etc.) that constitute a significant element of
palaeolithic cave art are interpreted as symbols (as Leroi-Gourhan and
Annette Laming have suggested) this also could be cited as evidence to
demonstrate that primitive consciousness is not restricted to the concrete
and the particular. See P. Ucko and Andree Rosenfeld, Palaeolithic Cave
and particular as was once thought.

Despite the modified accounts of more recent anthropologists, in its broad outline Vico's analysis of primitive consciousness has received substantial support from twentieth-century scholars. Even where the authorities disagree with the details of his positive findings, most grant the distinction between the operation of a 'primitive' mind and that of a 'civilised' one. It is to some extent unimportant whether Vico supplied a valid solution to the problem or not; it is sufficient distinction that it was he who first asked the question.

Vico himself attributed great significance to his theory of 'primitive' mentality for he asserted that his discovery of the workings of the poetic mind provided the "master key" for his investigation of the remote past. By means of his theory of poetic consciousness

... he establishes the only principles of mythology according to which the fables bore historical evidence as to the first Greek commonwealths, and by their aid he explains all the fabulous history of the heroic commonwealths. 114

His theory of poetry also provided him with the foundations for his theory of language which enabled him to use it as a source of historical evidence:

We find that the principle of these origins both of languages and of letters lies in the fact that the early gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters. 115

Hence it was his insight into the nature of the poetic mind which Vico claimed unlocked the historical evidence embodied in myth and language and so allowed him to embark on the positive programme of The New Science.

113. See The New Science, 34.
115. The New Science, 34.
CHAPTER VII

THE POETIC MIND IN ACTION: THE VICHIAN THEORY OF MYTH

The Poetic Nature of Myth

One of the major sources Vico employed in his attempt to reconstruct the history of the 'obscure ages' was the body of myth crystallised by the poets of classical Greece and Rome. By probing this material he believed that he could "reconstruct the facts of the prehistoric period of humanity". To utilize it in this way, however, he was compelled to formulate new interpretative concepts for all previous endeavours in this field had proved to be both inadequate and unsatisfactory. Interpretations such as those put forward in Francis Bacon's *The Wisdom of the Ancients* (1609), Vico dismissed as "more ingenious and learned than true". Vico's conclusions on the nature of myth were a direct consequence of his theory of poetry and his contention that primordial consciousness was essentially poetic. He himself was very much aware of the relationship and made specific reference to it:

... by virtue of new principles of mythology herein disclosed as consequences of the new principles of poetry found herein, it is shown that the fables were true and trustworthy histories.

Vico's claim that his theory of myth was merely an applied aspect of his theory of poetry indicates the close relationship he saw between the two theories:

That which is metaphysics insofar as it contemplates things in all the forms of their being, is logic insofar as it considers things in all the forms by which they are signified. Accordingly, as poetry has been considered by us above as a poetic metaphysics in which the theological poets imagined bodies to be for the most part divine substances, so now that same poetry is considered as poetic logic, by which it signifies them.

It is statements such as this which justify Caponigri's assertion that Vico's theory of myth is but the application of his speculations on the nature of poetry to a specific problem:

The Vichian poetics, as it provides the instrument for the penetration of the spontaneous consciousness and for the inception of the positive programme of the "New Science" is a theory of myth. 5

Granted the identification of poetic and primordial consciousness, Vico argued that myth was simply the normal way in which very ancient man expressed his ideas. It was not a deliberately chosen mode of communication - there was no choice involved, for it was the only means of expression with which primordial man was conversant. Hence myth was not a skillfully contrived expression of thought which was in radical contrast with the structure of its mode of expression but a spontaneous and natural statement of primordial thought:

... the mythologies ... must have been the proper languages of the fables; the fables being imaginative class-concepts ... the mythologies must have been the allegories corresponding to them. 7

This line of reasoning led Vico to assert that myths were not purely fictitious. Indeed, for reasons which will be discussed below, he considered that they were accounts of historical events, couched in a genre which was peculiar to the 'primitive' mind. Originally, they constituted true narrations of the civil history of the most ancient times, their fabulous form being "born of the grossness" of the human mind in its infancy. Hence Vico's contention: "the fables were true and trustworthy histories".

Myth: its Pristine Meaning Lost

The myths with which Vico preoccupied himself were those crystallised by the writers of classical Greece and Rome. These latter poets, however, were not the authors of the traditions concerning the gods and heroes for these took their origin from primordial man in the earliest stages of history. Hence, if their pristine significance could be recaptured they would shed light on a

7. ibid., 403.
8. ibid., 816.
9. ibid., 457.
10. ibid., 7.
period which was much more ancient than that of classical Greece.

It was evident to Vico that myths had lost their original meaning by classical times. Although their outward structure may have survived the course of time, the accompanying change in human mentality prevented the men of the third cultural stage (the age of man) from appreciating their original significance. They had no conception of the rich imagination of those who had first given expression to the fables. Unable to comprehend them, they imbued them with meanings according to the interests and values of their own time and so debased and obscured their original meaning:

But because for the most part they [myths] were originally monstrous, they were later misappropriated, then altered, subsequently became improbable, after that obscure, then scandalous and finally incredible. 14

Vico postulated that this development of myth followed the pattern which he had laid down for all human development:

... fables in their beginnings were all true and severe and worthy of the founders of nations, and only later (when the long passage of years had obscured their meanings, and customs had changed from austere to dissolve, and because men to console their consciences wanted to sin with the authority of the gods) came to have the obscene meanings with which they have come down to us. 16

Accordingly, he asserted that myths had evolved through three stages, the first witnessing their emergence at the hands of the theological poets, the second seeing their vitiation by the heroic poets and the third crystallising them in this corrupted form:

The first age invented the fables to serve as true narratives ... The second altered and corrupted them. The third and last, that of Homer, received them thus corrupted. 17

11. ibid., 399.
12. ibid., 220.
13. Since myth was originally a product of primordial man, Vico saw this as a necessity:

... the fables originating among the first savage and crude men were very severe, as befitted the founding of nations emerging from a state of fierce bestial freedom. See ibid., 221.
14. ibid., 814.
15. See ibid., 241.
16. ibid., 81.
17. ibid., 808. For an extended discussion of these stages see A. Grimaldi, op. cit., p.219. See also David Birney, 'Vico's New Science of Myth', in Giorgio Tagliacozzo, Giambattista Vico—an International Symposium, Baltimore, 1969, p.266.
The Pristine Significance of Myth

Since one of his major concerns in *The New Science* was the reconstruction of the history of the 'obscure ages' Vico's prime task was to recapture the pristine significance of myth. His developmental model led him to postulate that myth in its original form must have been a spontaneous expression of primordial thought. As such it must have possessed univocal rather than analogical significance:

... divine or heroic characters are found to have been true fables or stories, and their allegories are discovered to contain meanings not analogical but univocal... 18

It followed that each term in a myth must originally have had a single referrent, thus making myths of a factual nature. Myths therefore embodied statements about the real world; they were not general maxims that could be interpreted as ethical, moral or exhortatory statements. They were expressions about everyday affairs, couched in a logic that was different from that of eighteenth-century rationalism. They were the equivalent of the 'reflective mind's' codes of law and scientific treatises.

One of the fundamental premisses comprising Vico's theory of myth was his belief in its veridical nature, its truth bearing capacity. He found support for this contention in the ubiquitous and perennial nature of myth:

Vulgar traditions must have had public grounds of truth, by virtue of which they came into being and were preserved by entire peoples over long periods of time. 22

His postulate that myth was a product of poetic man also strengthened him in this opinion. Since his thought was spontaneous, primordial man was incapable of making a deliberately false statement. He could not intentionally mislead for he lacked the intellect necessary - thought of the second order, reflection.

Where there was but a simple and direct movement of the human mind, uncomplicat-

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18. *The New Science*, 34. See also *ibid.*, 210, 403.
ed by reflection, there could be no attempt to deceive:

Irony certainly could not have begun until the period of reflection, because it is fashioned of falsehood by dint of a reflection which wears the mask of truth. 23

Because of this inability to reflect, the possibility of deception did not arise and so primitive man was naturally "truthful, open, faithful, generous and magnanimous". Myth, as the artefact of such a mind could not be anything but a trustworthy source of information:

... since the first men of the gentile world had the simplicity of children, who are truthful by nature, the first fables could not feign anything false; they must therefore have been ... true narrations. 25

Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of Vico's speculations on myth was his belief that originally myths had been true accounts of historical events. He certainly regarded this as one of his major discoveries. Myths were not only factual and veridical, they were also of historical significance - the "most ancient histories". They were not detailed accounts written in the mode of eighteenth-century rationalism but broad sketches of important events in the remote past, expressed in a manner proper to primitive peoples:

... it may be said that in the fables the nations have in a rough way and in the language of the human senses described the beginnings of this world of sciences... 27

In this contention Vico was influenced by his postulate that verse had preceded prose. Hence, if logic and metaphysics had at first been poetic it was more than probable that the first histories had been of a similar nature:

Inasmuch as the poets came certainly before the vulgar historians, the first history must have been poetic. 28

He was confirmed in this hypothesis by his observation of the writings of known poets. Latin poets such as Gunther and William of Apulia, Medieval poets such as Boiardo, Ariosto and the celebrated Dante, he argued, all portrayed

23. ibid., 408. See also A.R. Caponigri, op. cit., p.169.
25. ibid., 408.
26. ibid., 46.
27. ibid., 779.
28. ibid., 813.
real events in their poems and took their subjects from history. They "sang nothing but history". This he considered was

... luminous proof of the fact that the first fables were histories. For satire spoke ill of persons not only real but well known; tragedy took for its arguments characters of poetic history; the Old Comedy put into its plots illustrious living persons; the New Comedy, born in times of the most lively reflection, finally invented characters entirely fictitious ... and neither among the Greeks nor among the Latins was an entirely fictitious character ever the protagonist of a tragedy. Strong confirmation of this is found in the popular taste which will not accept musical dramas, the arguments of which are always tragic, unless they are taken from history, whereas it will tolerate fictitious plots in comedies because, since they deal with private life which is not public knowledge, it believes them true. Since poetic characters are of this nature, their poetic allegories [myths] ... must necessarily contain historical significations referring only to the earliest times of Greece. 31

Because of his strong anti-diffusionist concepts Vico rejected any suggestion that a people took its myths from some external source. Hence the myths of any given society were indicative of the history of that society. Since each nation, in its origin, was cut off from all other peoples, being entirely self-sufficient, it followed of necessity that myths were indigenous, not borrowed. Consequently they were reflective of a nation's history:

... since in their beginnings these nations were forest-bred and shut off from any knowledge of each other ... the first fables must have contained civil truths, and must therefore have been the histories of the first peoples. 33

The specific type of history of which primordial myth recounted was political or civil in nature. All myths, Vico contended, carried information bearing on the civil or social life of early man:

... the theological poets had invented their fables with political matters in mind, as they as founders of nations naturally could not help doing... 34

Hence Vico's conclusions on the pristine significance of myth: it was factual; it was veridical; it was historical.

29. ibid., 817.
30. Vico considered poetic characters to be of the essence of the fables.
32. See Ch. V.
33. The New Science, 198.
34. ibid., 721.
Two Categories of Myth

Vico divided the corpus of classical myth into two broad categories - the divine and the heroic. The former were fables of the gods and so represented histories of the primordial stage of human social development:

... the fables of the gods were stories of the times in which men of the crudest gentile humanity thought that all things necessary or useful to the human race were deities.

The latter were accounts of deeds done by the heroes and so represented histories of the second stage of cultural development:

... the heroic fables were true stories of the heroes and their heroic customs, which are found to have flourished in the barbarous period of all nations.

Myth, therefore, was a source for reconstructing the history of the first two ages - the 'obscure ages'.

The task which now confronted Vico was to demonstrate how this content could be reached. Granted that myths were primordial histories, how were these historical reservoirs to be tapped? What was their factual content and how was it to be discovered? Vico's speculations on the nature of poetry and his ensuing conclusion that primitive man was fundamentally poetic, once again provided him with a solution to his difficulty. The essence of myth lay in the poetic characters. If one appreciated the nature of these, the empirical content of the various myths would become manifest.

The "Dramatis Personae" of Myth

The protagonists of myth were for the most part gods, heroes, beasts and monsters. The gods and heroes usually assumed an active role while gods, beasts, monsters and, to a lesser degree heroes occupied a passive or objective role in the poetic sentences. At first glance these beings appeared to have little, if any, historical significance. Vico asserted, however, that the

35. ibid., 7.
36. loc.cit.
37. ibid., 816.
various creatures appearing in myth were all poetic characters. They constituted the logical subjects (the beings, objects or things) of primordial man's universe. Myth was thus concerned with the real world and it was in the poetic characters that the key to unravelling the historical content of myth lay.

Vico asserted that the poetic characters fashioned by the theological poets (the men of the first stage of cultural development) were all gods. At this stage of his history man animated every facet of his environment and since its workings were beyond his comprehension he invested it with supra-human powers, thus creating the various divinities. Divine characters, therefore, filled both active and passive roles in the earliest myths, gods being invoked both to explain events and to denote objects or things.

The active role ascribed to the gods was a product of ancient man's inability to appreciate the forces operative in nature. The only way in which he could explain the various phenomena he perceived was to view them as the effect of some god. Since, at that very early stage of his development, he was at the mercy of his environment, almost to the point of being determined by it, the gods who controlled it, were invested with all causal power. Human causation was thus submerged in the divine. Hence it is the gods, not man, who appear as causal agents in the fables. On Vico's analysis, therefore, the causal activity ascribed to the gods was merely a poetic means of explaining the events whichimpinged on human consciousness.

The denotative function of the divine characters was brought about by the tendency of ancient men to animate their surroundings. Since they had no notion of the forces operative in nature, when lightning and thunder, for example, shook the sky they conceived it as a vast animate body. Because they

38. The notion of a poetic character is discussed above. See Ch.VI.
40. In the first two stages of cultural evolution all substantives were poetic characters. In the first age they were creations of divine poetry; in the second products of heroic poetry. For brevity I refer to them as divine or heroic characters while keeping in mind that they were both poetic.
41. For elaboration of this point see Ch.VI.
42. The New Science, 379.
expressed their very violent passions by shouting and grumbling, they pictured the sky to themselves as a great animated body, which in that aspect they called Jove... 43

In this way Jove came to denote the sky and in a similar manner the various other gods emerged, each denoting different segments or aspects of primordial man's world:

By means of these three divinities [Jove, Cybele, Neptune]... they explained everything appertaining to the sky, the earth and the sea. And similarly by means of the other divinities they signified the other kinds of things appertaining to each, denoting all flowers for instance by Flora, and all fruits by Pomona. 44

Vico asserted that the inability of these early men to abstract prevented them from referring to a specific facet or attribute of an object or custom. They could only speak of them by invoking the name of the god which denoted that object or institution. In other words, primordial man had the use only of proper nouns, not common nouns:

... there is the property of the earliest peoples... by which they are incapable of abstracting qualities from subjects and therefore can only designate the qualities by naming the subjects to which they belong. 45

Hence primitive man could only include some attribute of the sky or marriage, for example by reference to Jove or Juno. This deficiency prevented him engaging in analytic thought and consequently detailed and accurate reports. The divine fables, therefore, were only very general histories.

By the second stage of his cultural development man had made some progress toward the mastery of his environment. Consequently, his appreciation of his own causal efficacy was far greater than it had been in the preceding stage. His tendency to concretize, however, conditioned him to telescope into one particular individual all the causal activity, within a given sphere, of generations of men. The end product, because of the many wondrous deeds attributed to him, was a superman - a hero. Thus all those nameless men who contributed to the emergence of the Greek nation were subsumed under the type

43. ibid., 377.
44. ibid., 402.
45. ibid., 768.
46. See Ch.VI.
name, the poetic character, Hercules. In a similar fashion Hermes Trismegistus came to denote all those who had brought about Egyptian civilisation. Achilles, for example embodied all the attributes of the valiant man while Odysseus was a composite of all the attributes of the cunning man.

The beasts which appear in the heroic myths were a product of heroic man's tendency to animate his environment, not as gods but as beasts. These animals were particularised animate forms denoting different segments of the environment. The lion, for example, was the heroic character which signified the forest. It was associated with the latter and so, in the poetic mind, came to represent it. Thus the various myths recounting Hercules' slaying of the lion merely record that during the Age of the Heroes man cut back the forests. The serpent was the heroic character which denoted the earth. The association of the earth and the serpent is obvious. The myths which record that Cadmus slew the great serpent recount that in the heroic age man prepared the earth for cultivation.

The monsters which appear in the heroic myths are usually composite creatures. Vico considered that this was testimony to primitive man's poverty of intellect. Since heroic man was unable to abstract attributes from entities when he wished to unite or sever two attributes he was forced to connect or divide individuals. Thus the imaginary creatures of the heroic myths arose from a necessity of this first human nature, its inability to abstract forms or properties from subjects. By their logic they had to put subjects together in order to put their forms together, or to destroy a subject in order to separate its primary form from the contrary form which had been imposed upon it. Such a putting together of ideas created the poetic monsters.

The myth depicting Hercules' killing of the hydra contains several facts of

47. The New Science, 508, 761.
48. ibid., 412, 416.
49. ibid., 403.
50. ibid., 3.
53. ibid., 410.
poetic history. The hydra was a complex beast: it was coloured black, green and gold; it was covered with scales and spines; it had wings and was ever vigilant. Given Vico's analysis, this myth recounts how in the heroic age man cleared the earth (the beast) of thorns and briars (the scales and spines) which were everywhere abundant (ever vigilant). The colours indicate that the earth was first burnt (black), then cultivated (green) and finally harvested of its ripe grain (gold). The wings of the hydra indicate that the land was owned by the aristocracy.

Hence, once it was realised that the substantive terms of myth denoted poetic characters it would be appreciated that fables contain information on the everyday affairs of ancient man. Myths concerning Jove were statements about occurrences in the sky. Fables concerning Hercules were accounts of the founding of cities, and so on. Myth, however, did not record the activities of individual men but rather the "momentous occurrences in the gradual socialization of mankind". They told of the origin of religion, marriage and burial (and consequently the beginning of history); the origin of nations; the establishment of classes within society; the conflicts between these classes; the enfranchisement of foreigners; the beginnings of agriculture; the foundation of cities; migrations and colonization; the beginnings of chronology. Thus, under Vico's steady vision

... the phantastic exploits of the gods and goddesses dissolve ... disclosing the grim reality of mortal creatures struggling to issue forth from their bestial state.

54. ibid., 540.
56. The New Science, 8, 176, 198, 333.
57. ibid., 721, 770, 773.
58. ibid., 589.
59. ibid., 586-7, 650, 654.
60. ibid., 655.
61. ibid., 3, 546, 679.
62. ibid., 561.
63. ibid., 78, 560.
64. ibid., 733.
65. A. Grimaldi, op.cit., p.165.
The Significance of the Vichian Theory of Myth

The significance of the Vichian theory of myth resides in its originality, the problems it solved and its uncanny foreshadowing of a number of contemporary approaches to the study of myth. Vico's conclusions in this field led him to reject a number of popular eighteenth-century notions which considered myths as either pretty stories or inventions "by a lot of lying priests" which were used to exploit "credulous fools". His theories also militated against all those opinions which presupposed that fables embodied esoteric or reflective thought. He believed that it was this prejudice which had vitiated all previous attempts to elaborate a satisfactory theory of myth. To suggest that myths were allegories expressing reflective knowledge by means of a poetic medium was to impute a sophistication to primordial man which, given Vico's developmental model, was clearly untenable. Samuel Beckett appreciated this point:

Allegory implies a threefold intellectual operation: the construction of a message of general significance, the preparation of a fabulous form, and an exercise of considerable technical difficulty in uniting the two, an operation totally beyond the reach of the primitive mind.

Hence any hypothesis implying that myth embodied abstract wisdom was a vitiation of myth by thinkers in later ages:

The philosophers later found all these fables convenient for the meditation and exposition of their moral and metaphysical doctrines.

One of the most significant contributions of Vico's theory of myth was that it presented a solution to some of the chronological problems involved in the study of antiquity. He was aware of the importance of chronology in any pursuit of an historical nature and believed that his speculations on myth paved

67. Francis Bacon is an example of a seventeenth-century scholar guilty of this prejudice.
68. See Ch.V.
70. The New Science, 720.
71. ibid., 17.
the way for elaborating a satisfactory chronological framework for the remote past.

The hypothesis of the poetic character, if accepted, cleared up a number of chronological difficulties. If figures such as Orpheus were not deemed poetic characters they were chronological monstrosities. Vico calculated that Orpheus would have had to live for at least a thousand years to accomplish all that was attributed to him. Once it was realised, however, that Orpheus was a poetic character, a generalised type, and not an historical individual the chronological problem dissolved.

On the more positive side, Vico's conclusions presented a means for establishing the sequence of the events reported in the fables. The protagonists of the fables (gods, heroes), he argued, corresponded to the first necessities or utilities of primitive man. He pointed out that every need of human life - physical, moral, economic, civil - was signified by one or other of the thirty thousand Greek divinities. It followed, Vico urged, that the natural theogony of the gods contained in the fables indicated the order of events. Thus the establishment of religion preceded that of marriage since Jove was prior to Juno. Man's concern with the sea emerged very late in the Age of the Gods since Neptune was the last of the gentes maiores. Vico went so far as to suggest that the major gods delineated successive periods within the Age of the Gods and so presented a relative chronology for man's earliest history.

And the twelve major gods, beginning with Jove, successively imagined within this age, serve to divide it into twelve smaller epochs and thus give some certainty to the chronology of poetic history. 77

Vico's penetrating insight into the nature of myth has not passed unnoticed by twentieth-century scholars. Whittaker, for example, remarks:

72. ibid., 81.
73. ibid., 79.
74. ibid., 734. This postulate was based on the axiom that men first feel necessity, then seek utility and only later look to comfort. See ibid., 241.
75. ibid., 175, 437.
76. For a list of the twelve major gods and their function, see Opere, IV, pp.151-60.
77. The New Science, 734.
Whatever may be thought of these interpretations in detail, there can be no doubt about the keenness of Vico's insight into the nature of the problem ... By this method of conjectural search, many secrets of the past are now being unveiled. 78

The importance of Vico in this sphere lies not in the fact that he suggested that certain folk heroes were mythical (i.e. were not historical individuals). 79 This opinion had been previously expressed. It was rather that he presented a generalised solution, one that was allegedly valid for the interpretation of all myths.

Many of Vico's postulates on myth have been, to some extent, supported by modern anthropologists and classicists. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, after examining non-classical myths, came to the conclusion that they were the natural means of expression of a mentality quite different from that of the twentieth-century mind. Vico's contention that fables bore historical content has also been reinforced. Thalia Phillips Howe maintains that it is now generally recognised that the myths of a given people reflect its social history, its experiences both actual and imaginary. 81

Similar thoughts are expressed by the renowned Homeric scholar, G. S. Kirk. He is of the opinion that myths still "carry fragmentary overtones of the past".

Howe also advances the theory that myths were originally spontaneous narratives which were later reworked and embellished by a long line of poets. Kirk argues along similar lines suggesting that myth has been subject to change during the course of which its nature and significance has been radically altered. The crystallisation of myth by the classical poets he considers

79. By Aristotle for example. See T. Whittaker, op.cit., p.70.
was predominantly a literary creation, quite separate in form, method and intention either from spontaneous myths of the preliterate past or from their transitional descendants. Kirk would here seem to be reinforcing the Vichian account of the evolution of myth. He views this development as a mixed blessing. What myth gained from its systematic complexity ... lost by the gradual diminution of its imaginative and speculative aspects ... The genuine mythopoeic urge lay in the hidden past; even Homer and Hesiod were working with a long, selective and formalized tradition.

Vico's claim that myth was indicative of the history of the 'obscure ages' (prehistory) finds support in both Howe and Bidney. The latter willingly admits that myths are "expressions of prehistoric culture" while the former takes the myth of Jason and Medea and traces its origins back to the late neolithic period in Crete.

Miss Howe's conclusions on the nature of the subjects of myth (the Vichian poetic characters) are strongly reminiscent of Vico. She argues that as the materials for myth are selected and detached from the social atmosphere and are crystallized about a theme, protagonists are chosen to carry the theme who are usually not derived from historical figures but are, instead, generalized social prototypes. Other aspects of Vico's theory are paralleled in Kirk's findings. He argues that Egyptian and Indian myths have had little influence on their Greek counterparts. This would appear to lend weight to Vico's rejection of the diffusion of myth. Kirk also suggests that the division of myth into divine and heroic still has its uses.

Despite the support manifested for a number of the Vichian postulates

84. G.S.Kirk, op.cit., p.250.
85. See above, pp.111-112.
86. Vico's poetic activity?
87. G.S.Kirk, op.cit., p.251. Cf. The New Science, 808. Kirk would seem to suggest three stages in the evolution of myth: pristine myth as a spontaneous creation (Vico's stage of the theological poets); a transitional stage (Vico's heroic age) and the stage of crystallisation (Vico's Homeric and post-Homeric stage).
89. op.cit., pp.156-165.
90. ibid., p.155.
91. op.cit., p.223.
92. See above, p.115.
there remain others which appear quite unsatisfactory while some would seem to
be completely untenable. The first and most obvious deficiency in Vico's
position is that his theory of myth is based solely on classical evidence.
Greek and Roman myths, however, are but two examples of myth. Any conclusions
drawn from this body of evidence can be valid only in this restricted area.
Vico's was a theory of classical myth, not of myth in general.

The notion of the poetic character is one that is not entirely clear in
all its aspects. It is by no means certain whether these figures, although
grounded in historical reality, were real historical individuals that were
embellished or simply collections of qualities that were denoted by a name.
Were they universalised individuals or a concretised collection of universals?
Vico's treatment of the Homeric problem highlights this question.

The classification of Solon as a poetic figure is one instance where it
would appear that Vico was definitely mistaken. All the evidence points to
the conclusion that Solon was in fact an historical individual. In this case
it appears that Vico has made an over enthusiastic and consequently a far too
liberal application of a new and exciting theory.

Vico's contention that all myths were fundamentally narrative in purpose
is a further postulate that must be modified in the light of recent scholarship.
Malinowski found that Trobrianders made a three-fold division of their myths:
folktales told for entertainment; legends with historical content; myths that
served a sacred or religious purpose. Kirk states that within the body of
classical myth there can be found some thirty two different themes. He
suggests, as a simplified pragmatic typology, three classes: the narrative and
entertaining; the operative, iterative and validatory; the speculative and

94. It may perchance be valid for all myth but Vico does not demonstrate this.
95. See Ch.X.
97. See for example: Herodotus, The Histories, I, 29-34, 86; Aristophanes,
The Clouds, 1187; Aeschines, Against Ctesiphon, 257; Demosthenes, Against
Androtion, 30.
98. See G.S. Kirk, op.cit., p.20.
explanatory. Levy-Bruhl is another who affirms that myths are not always narrative in purpose. He considers that they are quite often evocative. Vico's hypothesis that myths were simply narratives is, then, an oversimplification.

The claim that myths were made up of propositions that were necessarily true is also an untenable hypothesis. If the Vichian arguments on this point demonstrate anything they show that primitive man could not intentionally deceive. Deliberately to mislead and to be mistaken, however, are two quite distinct possibilities. To use Vico's terminology, the former belongs to the sphere of the certum, the latter, to that of the verum. A myth may contain what its author deems to be the truth but it does not necessarily follow that the state of affairs is as he perceives it.

David Bidney, one of the few anthropologists to indicate that he is aware of Vico's work, rejects Vico's contention that myth is a factual report of historical events. He comments:

... instead of treating myths historically as expressions of prehistoric culture and thought which inform us primarily about the authors and subjects of the myths ... he [Vico] proceeded to interpret them, in addition, as allegories ... Thus he tended to assume that the myths were primarily vehicles for the symbolic expression of historical truths that the poets in their wisdom wished to record for posterity. He confused the subjective, historical truth of the myths with their objective, historical truth by assuming a unity of object for myths, for which he had no evidence but that of his own fertile imagination.

Although this criticism carries a certain force, Vico did not confuse the subjective and objective historical truth embedded in myth. He used the fables to come to an appreciation of the mentality of primitive man which he then employed both to show that myth did possess factual content and to demonstrate how that content could be interpreted. By taking into account

100. Ibid., pp. 253-54.
102. See above, p. 114.
103. See Ch.IX.
105. Far from confusing the issue, it was Vico who first emphasised the importance of the distinction. See Ch.II.
the subjective, historical truth of myth, Vico approached an understanding of its objective historical content and so gained some appreciation of the events of the prehistoric past.

Although the subjective and objective historical truth of myth may be logically distinguished, they cannot be separated, as Bidney seems to imply. They necessarily condition each other and without a full appreciation of one there can be no true understanding of the other. Bidney may be correct in asserting that Vico's claims regarding the objective content of myth were products of an over-fertile imagination. If so, Vico's interpretation of its subjective content is open to the same criticism. Bidney cannot accept one and reject the other.

While Vico's theory of myth and its application certainly present difficulties, it remains a significant development in the history of European attitudes to primitive man and his artefacts. It is an achievement which requires more than token acknowledgement or polite denigration.
CHAPTER VIII

THE POETIC MIND IN ACTION: VICO'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE

Vico's Attitude to Language

Language constituted the second important source which Vico employed for his investigation of the remote past. Indeed, the two pillars on which his reconstruction of the 'obscure ages' rested were his theory of myth and his insight into the nature of language. A true appreciation of language, he contended, would enable scholars... to make discoveries of antiquities far beyond their expectations and ours. 1

This appreciation of the historical value of language was not evident in early Vichian thought. In The Study Methods (1708), the only value he seems to attribute to the study of language is a pragmatic one - it is useful to a young man wishing to make his way in society. Linguistic skills were ancillary to rhetoric. The De Antiquissima (1710) indicated that his views on this subject had changed radically for in this work he purports to glean an understanding of the knowledge of the ancient Italians from an examination of their language. Although the conclusions he reaches are not important in this context, the work's significance lies in the fundamental change in approach which it reveals. In The New Science the approach of the De Antiquissima is developed. Language is there conceived in dynamic terms and considered to be culturally contaminated. Hence the growth of a language reflects the growth of a people - its history:

The vulgar tongues should be the most weighty witnesses concerning those ancient customs of the peoples that were observed at the time when the languages were being formed. 4

3. See Ch.IV, p.56.
Vico asserted that a full appreciation of the historical evidence embodied in language necessitated an understanding of its nature and inner dynamism, and hence its origin. The problem of linguistic origins had occupied scholars for centuries. As early as Plato attempts had been made to present a solution and, according to Vico, it was Plato who provided him with the stimulation to begin his own investigations in this field. Although many solutions had been offered since the time of Plato, Vico held little respect for them. In his opinion they were all

... so uncertain, frivolous, inept, pretentious or ridiculous, and so numerous, that we need not relate them.

Hence Plato's theory, along with those of Vossius, Hugo, Scaliger and Sanchez were deemed eminently unsatisfactory. In Vico's opinion, his contemporaries, in following Plato, had all made the mistake of approaching the problem with the assumption that primordial man was possessed of Aristotelian logic, an approach which led to nothing but confusion and despair. The conventional thesis was a product of ignorance, ignorance of the origin of language:

... the grammarians, encountering great numbers of words ... and not their origins ... have given peace to their ignorance by setting up the universal maxim that articulate human words have arbitrary significations.

Vico considered it a solution which revealed "an excess of good faith".

The conventional theories militated against the entire Vichian approach to history. An analysis of language in static terms flatly contradicted his developmental model which he considered valid for all cultural material. It was impossible that language could have suddenly appeared, fully formed.

5. See The Cratylus.
8. The New Science, 455.
9. ibid., 428.
only did the traditional theories ascribe an unwarranted sophistication to primordial man, they also involved themselves in circularity. If language is to serve its purpose its referents must be agreed upon by at least two people. It follows that if its referents are arbitrary some medium of communication is necessary to determine what each term will signify. Hence to suppose that the referents of language are arbitrary in origin is to presuppose that some medium of speech already existed and so begs the question with regard to the origin of language. Vico somewhat ironically remarks that such approaches to the problem presuppose that

... the peoples that invented language must first have gone to school to him Aristotles. 13

Vico's approach to the problem of language was in accord with his entire treatment of history. Language was of a dynamic nature, it was something that grew and was ever in a state of flux. Hence it was born and subject to a constant but gradual development. It had not suddenly appeared as a gift of the gods or the product of an arbitrary decision.

Language, Vico argued, evolved in the natural course of events. It was a cultural device, a man-made tool aimed at assisting in survival. It eventuated from everyday needs such as the necessity for certainty of ownership. Its emergence was spontaneous, not the result of a deliberate decision as the traditional theories implied. Hence language was not an artificially constructed medium of communication but a natural development, the course of which was inseparable from that of the human mind. Its beginnings would therefore have been rude, just as the nature of the men who had initiated it had been coarse and barbaric. Since it was the primordial or poetic mind that had provided the original stimulus to the evolution of language it was in this mind that its origins were to be sought:

14. ibid., 483.
15. ibid., 409.
16. ibid., 456.
The philosophers and philologians should all have begun to treat of the origins of language and letters from the following principles. (1) That the first men of the gentile world conceived ideas of things by imaginative characters of animate and mute substances. (2) That they expressed themselves by means of gestures or physical objects which had natural relations with the ideas; for example, three ears of grain, or acting as if swinging a scythe three times, to signify three years. (3) That they thus expressed themselves by a language with natural significations.

The natural origin of language, Vico urged, necessarily implied that the first words must have been naturally associated with the things they denoted. The existence of hieroglyphics, which he thought was the first script of all nations, demonstrated this point. They were not the inventions of philosophers, repositories of esoteric wisdom, but primordial man's first attempt at writing. Hieroglyphics were not an arbitrarily chosen device but the only means at ancient man's disposal - a rude script as befitted crude men.

It was this hieroglyphic form of writing which gave Vico his first clue to the origin of language. Since the beginnings of language and script were coincidental, the significations of the latter would cast light on those of the former. It was clear, however, that hieroglyphics bore a natural relation to the things they signified. It must therefore be the case with language also. In Vico's opinion, it was the failure of thinkers to realise this fact (that language and writing began together) that had led to the confusion.

But the difficulty as to the manner of their origin was created by the scholars themselves, all of whom regarded the origin of letters as a separate question from that of the origin of languages, whereas the two were by nature conjoined.

In very logical fashion, Vico asserted that the first attempts at language began in "mute times". The language of this period was a form of communication that employed concepts (albeit concrete) and objects but no words. At this stage it was in no way symbolic, abstract or articulate. Communication was

17. ibid., 431.
18. ibid., 444.
19. ibid., 455. It should be noted that Sumerian Cuneiform is earlier than Egyptian hieroglyphic.
20. loc. cit.
21. ibid., 431. Vico argued that the term 'grammar' made this evident. Originally it meant the art of speaking or the art of writing. See ibid., 429.
22. ibid., 429.
23. ibid., 401.
based on a mental language from which, at subsequent dates, the many different articulate languages developed.

There must in the nature of human things be a mental language common to all nations, which uniformly grasps the substance of things ... and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects. 24

Before the emergence of phonetic language primitive man employed gestures or objects to express his concepts (his mental language):

... the first language in the first mute times of the nations must have begun with signs, whether gestures or physical objects, which had natural relations to the ideas [to be expressed]. 25

Vico gleaned support for this hypothesis from his observation of mutes:

Mutes make themselves understood by gestures or objects that have natural relations with the ideas they wish to signify. 26

The Greek word 'logos' provided further evidence for this contention. Vico observes that

... logos or "word" meant also "deed" to the Hebrews and "thing" to the Greeks... 27

Originally, then, there must have been no distinction between word, thing and deed. Vico concluded that the first languages had employed not words, fiat vocie, but real things. The 'words' were real objects. As an example of this real speech he cites the message sent to Darius by Idanthrysus. This example, Vico asserted, demonstrated that at the time of Idanthrysus the Scythians had not even reached the stage of hieroglyphic writing.

This natural speech, Vico hypothesised, had been succeeded by a poetic discourse, vocal sounds that were closely related to the objects they signified. His suggestion that the first words were monosyllabic was confirmed by

24. ibid., 161. It would seem that Vico's 'mental language' was merely a way of saying that primordial man perceived discrete wholes even if he had no phonetic language with which to denote them.

25. ibid., 401.

26. ibid., 225.

27. ibid., 401.

28. See ibid., 99. Idanthrysus sent five objects: a frog, a mouse, a bird, a ploughshare and a bow. For Vico's interpretation of the message see ibid., 435.

29. ibid., 99.

30. ibid., 227.
his observation of children.

The first vocal words, Vico contended, were a product of imitation:

... articulate language began to develop by way of onomatopoeia, through which we still find children happily expressing themselves. He takes as an illustration the word for Jove. Primordial man heard the roll of the thunder and the whistle of the lightning, or as Vico would contend, he observed Jove. How would such a man speak of Jove? Since he was by nature a poet and since imitation was a defining characteristic of poetry he would denote him by imitating the thunder or the lightning. Hence the Latins called Jove Ious because this was a word that sounded like thunder; the Greeks called him Zeus since this term approximated to the whistle of lightning.

Interjections, Vico surmised, were a second source of words. These were the natural sounds emitted under the influence of violent passions. Primitive man, steeped in the senses, was especially prone to such outbursts. Vico suggests that it was in this fashion that the word for father evolved:

Thus it is not beyond likelihood that, when wonder had been awakened in men by the first thunderbolts, these interjections of Jove should give birth to one produced by the human voice: "paw"; and that this should then be doubled: "papel". From this interjection of wonder was subsequently derived Jove's title of "father of men and gods"... In explaining the origin of language Vico also attributed a major rôle to singing. He remarks that the most grief-striken and the most joyful "vent great passions by breaking into song". Since primitive man was at the mercy of his senses Vico postulated that he was prone to express his feelings in a similar fashion.

Vico further maintained that in so far as the first words were not easy sounds to articulate, singing helped master their pronounciation. Indeed, he

31. ibid., 231.
32. ibid., 447.
33. loc. cit.
34. See ibid., 448. See also Opere, II, p.140.
36. ibid., 448.
37. ibid., 229.
38. ibid., 230.
suggests that

... this first song of the peoples sprang naturally from the
difficulty of the first utterances... 39

Once again Vico supported his hypothesis by appealing to comparative evidence.

Mutes utter formless sounds by singing, and stammerers by singing
 teach their tongues to pronounce. 40

It was by singing that primitive man achieved mastery of the consonantal sounds
 which came less naturally to him than vowel sounds.

The Development of Language

Once language had emerged it developed in an orderly fashion. As with
all cultural development, Vico proposed that language, in its development from
the incipient to its vulgar stage, had manifested itself in three forms. This
schema he borrowed from the Egyptians.

At the outset of our discussion, then, we posit as our first
principle ... that according to the Egyptians there had been
spoken in their world in all preceding time three languages. 42

The first of these was a divine mental language employed by the theolog­
ical poets. It was a fantastic form of speech, a mute language, that made
use of physical subjects which were thought to be divine. Writing at this
stage was confined to hieroglyphics. This was followed by heroic language,
a language that was symbolic (employed words) but which relied heavily on
metaphors, images and similes. Writing was restricted to the blazonings on
shields. Vulgar language was the next to evolve. As the human mind became
prone to abstraction and less dependent on imagination, objects were denoted
by "diminutive signs" - words. By this stage the part played by metaphor in
the development of language was forgotten. It was at this time that the
vulgar scripts also emerged.

39. ibid., 462.
40. ibid., 228.
41. ibid., 461.
42. ibid., 432.
43. ibid., 401, 432, 929.
44. ibid., 34, 432, 438.
45. ibid., 402, 935.
Vico did not intend that these stages be metaphysical straight-jackets. To inflict a number of clearly defined, static categories on an evolutionary process was not in accord with his general approach. The divisions were merely an heuristic device, employed for explaining the evolution of language from the concrete to the abstract. They were not sharply delineated stages but merged with one another:

The poetic speech which our poetic logic has helped us to understand continued for a long time into the historic period, much as great and rapid rivers continue far into the sea, keeping sweet the waters borne on by the force of their flow. 46

Poetry, Vico asserted, gave to language its internal dynamism. Language expanded and developed by means of poetic devices such as metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche. It was therefore not surprising to find that language in its infancy, its poetic stage, manifested a great abundance of vivid representations, images, similes, comparisons, metaphors and circumlocutions. Vico argued that these poetic devices were not to be construed as ingenious inventions; nor as a deliberate attempt to embellish or enrich primitive discourse. They were not employed from choice but from necessity; they were the only means of expression ancient man had at his disposal. Poetic language, said Vico,

... was born entirely of poverty of language and need of expression. 50

He observed that the most frequently occurring device was metaphor. It was significant, he remarked,

... that in all languages the greater part of the expressions relating to inanimate things are formed by metaphor from the human body and its parts and from the human senses and passions. 52

Examples of this phenomenon cited include the use of 'head' to denote the top of something; 'mouth' for the opening of anything; 'lip' for the rim of objects

46. *ibid.*, 412.
47. *ibid.*, 406-407.
49. *ibid.*, 409.
50. *ibid.*, 456.
51. *ibid.*, 404.
52. *ibid.*, 405.
such as vases.

Metaphor was clearly a means for extending and developing language. Its predominance in an infant language was only to be expected. Man had first become aware of his body. The words he had evoked to indicate its various parts, when he became conscious of his environment, were then applied to the various facets of his physical universe, by means of metaphorical thinking. It was by giving sense and passion to insensate things that metaphor brought about an extension of the denotative power of language. When man became aware of his spirituality (his mental activities) the vocabulary he employed to name mental objects and activities were products of a similar process. By means of metaphorical thought it was derived from the words that had been used to denote physical objects and activities. Vico would most certainly have agreed with Richter's comment: "Every language is a dictionary of faded metaphors".

Metaphor, with the other poetic devices, was one of the truly great creative forces in language. By extending the denotative function of vocabulary, it enabled man to cope more efficiently with his environment. It was, indeed, an authentic epistemological factor within language, each metaphor being, in fact, "a fable in brief".

Vico was totally committed to the view that the various languages had originated and evolved independently of each other. Since a nation in its primordial condition was impenetrable, the language of a given people at its formative stage had little chance of being influenced by outside factors. This isolation, in spite of the mental language common to all peoples, explained the existence of the many diverse languages:

There remains, however, the very great difficulty: How is it that there are as many different vulgar tongues as there are peoples? To solve it, we must here establish this great truth: that, as the

53. Vico also provides numerous other examples. See loc.cit.
54. ibid., 404.
55. ibid., 237.
57. The New Science, 404.
58. ibid., 63, 441.
59. ibid., 305. Vico cites China as an example.
peoples have certainly by diversity of climates acquired different natures, from which have sprung as many different customs, so from their different natures and customs as many different languages have arisen.

Hence, in the sphere of language, Vico was an environmental determinist, the diffusion of language from a single source being considered an impossibility. Any diffusion which had taken place occurred during the latter stages of a nation's development when its language was well developed. Hence the majority of words in a language were indigenous.

Since vocabulary was naturally related to the things that it signified, Vico's anti-diffusionist approach implied that the language of a people could only derive from the objects or events which impinged on that society. Thus a change in the cultural material of a society would necessitate a corresponding change in its language:

... this sequence of human things sets the pattern for the histories of words in the various native languages.

Thus, as the development of language is conditioned by the community that evokes it, so the history of a language reflects the history of the people who employ it.

The Historical Content of Language

This approach enabled Vico to employ language as a means for coming to a knowledge of the 'obscure ages'. His theory of language justified the utilization of literate sources for the purpose of inferring back to a period beyond that for which there was literary evidence. By using the indirect evidence supplied by language, by employing inference rather than report, he was able to go beyond what 'the ancient authors had said'.

To accomplish his task Vico used his linguistic theories to engage in etymological speculations. The etymologies of native or indigenous words, he asserted, were histories. They revealed the internal development of a people.

60. ibid., 445.
61. ibid., 22.
62. ibid., 240.
63. ibid., 22.
Foreign words, on the other hand, did not possess an etymology (except as native words of some other language) but were "mere stories of words taken by one language from another". They were useful for determining the contact of one society with another and the presence of the same foreign words in a number of languages allowed the historian to trace the movement of a people or else demonstrate that the one society had affected a number of communities. The various names that had graced Naples, for example, indicated that both Phoenicians and Greeks had founded colonies there.

It followed that the most useful languages for investigating remote antiquity were the mother-tongues. The term 'mother-tongue' connoted a language which had maintained itself a "dominant tongue throughout its development". Such languages would offer an ample array of indigenous words. They would, therefore, shed great light on the history of the time at which they were being formed. Vico considered that Latin, Greek and German were all mother-tongues.

Although Vico recommended the study of German to others he himself made little use of it. On occasion he did argue from the etymologies of Greek words, but the bulk of his linguistic evidence was taken from the Latin language.

By the reasoning out of these causes of the Latin language many discoveries have been made in ancient Roman history, government and law, as you will observe a thousand times, O reader, in this volume. His concentration on Latin etymologies was not a product of chance but of choice. He records how he noticed that polyglots, because they attempted to master a number of different tongues, usually ended up without a complete command of any one language. This led Vico to direct his efforts toward the mastery of one -

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64. Vico never tells us what the criterion is for judging a word to be native or foreign except in so far as one reflects the internal history of a society whereas the other does not. In the absence of some external criterion this would appear to involve a certain circularity.

65. The New Science, 22.
66. ibid., 304.
67. ibid., 152.
68. ibid., 33, 153.
69. See for example, ibid., 588, 607.
70. ibid., 33.
Vico's linguistic speculations led him to some interesting conclusions bearing on the history of early man. One of the more significant of these was that the ancient Latins had first been rude farmers. This, he argued, was clearly demonstrated by the vocabulary of the Latin language. He considered that "almost the whole corpus of its words had sylvan or rustic origins". Vico's speculations of the etymology of the term *legere*, "to read", constitute an excellent example of his linguistic arguments:

For example, *lex*. First it must have meant "collection of acorns". Thence we believe is derived *ilex*, as it were illex, "the oak" (as certainly *aquilex* is the "collector of waters"); for the oak produces the acorns by which the swine are drawn together. *Lex* was next "a collection of vegetables" from which the latter were called *legumina*. Later on, at a time when vulgar letters had not yet been invented for writing down the laws, *lex* by a necessity of civil nature must have meant "a collection of citizens" or the public parliament; so that the presence of the people was the law ... Finally collecting letters, and making as it were a sheaf of them in each word, was called *legere*, "reading".

A further conclusion was that agriculture was closely connected with the emergence of towns. This was indicated by the word *urbs* which had originally meant moldboard plough but came to mean city. The terms *āra* and *arātrum* led to the same conclusion. Originally, *āra* had the sense of "altar", a place of asylum, but had later come to denote town, for during the course of time asylums, because they attracted population, developed into towns. Vico alleged that it was from *āra* that *arātrum*, "plough", was derived. Hence the Latin language demonstrated a significant correlation between agriculture and urban development.

Vico's treatment of the verbs *esse* and *edere* is also of interest. The apparent similarity between them in their third person, present tense - *ēst* and *ēdere* respectively - led him to assert a close relationship between the two. In-

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71. The Autobiography, pp.133-34.
72. Some of these conclusions may have been prompted by his reading of Lucretius. See De Herum Natura, V, 922-1451. Vico, however, provides apparent linguist support for them.
73. The New Science, 240.
74. loc.cit.
75. ibid., 16, 550.
76. ibid., 775.
77. ibid., 778.
deed, he argued that the similarity was clear evidence that in remote antiquity to exist and to eat were considered identical. Vico concluded that these two Latin verbs indicated that primordial man had enjoyed a very rude existence—being was eating.

Perhaps the most successful of Vico's linguistic arguments was his rejection of the widely held belief that the Law of the Twelve Tables had been brought to Rome, en bloc, from Athens. Vico seized upon the very Roman word, auctoritas, which appeared in the code. He asserted that the Greeks did not possess a concept that even slightly resembled that which was denoted by auctoritas. Nor did their language contain a word that was in any way similar. He therefore rejected Livy's story, asserting that the code of the Twelve Tables was more probably a developmental product of the ancient Latins themselves.

An Evaluation of Vico's Linguistic Theory

Although it is not my intention to present a detailed critique of the Vichian theory of language, it involves a number of obvious fallacies upon which brief comment is necessary. It is quite evident for example, that language and script are not coeval and that the latter is always preceded by the former. Vico's position in this matter is quite inexplicable for he must have been aware of the existence of non-literate peoples who conversed quite freely and effectively. His reading of Herodotus should have indicated that the Scyths, although non-literate, were capable of speech.

Vico's extreme anti-diffusionist position with regard to language is also untenable given the state of present evidence. Modern philology leaves no

78. ibid., 693. Although Vico does not spell it out, his analysis of the two verbs could be used to argue that primordial man spent most of his time in search of food, a generally accepted postulate among prehistorians until quite recently. See for example, V. Gordon Childe, The Story of Tools, Morningside, 1944, p. 5.

79. It is difficult to find an English equivalent. The usual English equivalent is "authority". This, however, is quite inadequate for it fails to convey the richness and strength connoted by auctoritas.


81. See above, p. 131.
doubt that families of languages derive from common parent languages. Vico almost admits as much by emphasising the importance of "mother tongues". Perhaps his insistence on the individual origin of the various languages was an over vigorous reaction to the hyper-diffusionist theories prevalent in his own day.

A factor telling against the whole Vichian linguistic position is that the languages on which his theories are based, comparatively speaking, are far too modern. Vico's arguments suggesting that Zeus and Ious are products of onomatopoeia highlight the weakness of his position. Both Zeus and Jupiter derive from "Dieus". Hence if one wished to trace the origins of Zeus or Ious the argument would have to be pushed from the stem, "dui".

Vico's etymologies, although a very interesting facet of his work, also present problems. His assertion that arātrum is derived from āra, for example, is mistaken. Although the original sense of āra was undoubtedly "hearth of the god", it is probably closely related to ārēre, "to be dry". Arātrum on the other hand is a derivative of ārō, the dysyllabic root, ārā, meaning plough throughout Indo-European. Thus modern philologists are of the opinion that āra and arātrum come from distinct roots. Vico's arguments based on the apparent similarity of ēst and ēst are fallacious for similar reasons. The phonetic value of the vowels indicate that the two words stem from different roots.

Whatever one's evaluation of his positive conclusions, Vico's linguistic pursuits have not passed unnoticed. Despite the many deficiencies and obscurities within his theory of language and the use to which he put it, it is precisely in this sphere that he has attracted attention. Gillo Dorfles is an enthusiastic admirer:

The Vico who attracts me is the thinker who analyzes with sufficient vigor (although often with inadequate critical and scientific equip-

83. See above, p. 138.
84. See above, p. 133.
86. ibid., pp.42, 48.
ment), with notable acumen (even though, at times, with excessive lack of sophistication), certain surprising linguistic concatenations, certain strange etymological derivations, certain previously unthought-of correlations between language and custom.... 87

Although it is the general consensus that Vico was an extremely poor etymologist there is also ample evidence to suggest that his contribution to linguistic studies was of major importance. This is demonstrated both by those who make specific reference to his achievement and by those who, independently of Vico, have reached similar conclusions.

The opinion of Ernst Cassirer, one of the more eminent of the modern philosophers of language, is, perhaps, representative of the tributes showered on Vico. He remarks:

Strange and baroque as this theory [Vico's] may seem if we consider only its particular interpretations, it embodies an approach which was to prove extremely fruitful for future inquiry into the problem of language. 89

The tenor of Cassirer's remarks is echoed by James M. Edie who attributes to Vico

the first formulation of a non-rationalistic theory of language which is today beginning to be adopted (whether or not in direct dependence upon Vico himself) by linguists.... 90

Edie made special reference to the Vichian contribution to the study of metaphor, stating that he was the first scholar to demonstrate that the 'category mistakes' of metaphorical thinking were not the enemies of serious thought but the "primary instrument of the discovery of 'new' meaning".

Perhaps the most trustworthy guide to the value of the Vichian analysis, however, is the parallel conclusions put forward by contemporary scholars. It is from these that a more valid assessment of Vico's contribution can be made.

The Vichian approach to language in general, appears in the works of a
number of recent authors. The postulate that language is culturally contaminated and is therefore a valuable source of historical evidence is today a truism that is rarely, if ever, questioned. Approaches to the problem which presuppose that language is of a dynamic nature are to be found in most authors. A. S. Diamond, for example, speaks of language as "forever changing" and refers to its "communally organic character". He is also of the opinion that there is a significant correlation between mental and linguistic growth:

We have also inferred that this unending process of change in the proportions of the functional parts of language is also the process of development of the intellect.

Contemporary theories bearing on the origin of phonetic speech would also appear to reinforce the validity of the Vichian conclusions in this area. At this point it must be emphasised that any hypothesis purporting to explain the origins of language can at best be only a theory. Vico himself was aware of this. Indeed, he appears to be ascribing this status to his own conclusions when he remarks that

all this [his own theory] seems more reasonable than what Julius Caesar Scaliger and Francisco Sanchez have said with regard to the Latin language...

Despite the fact that it was only a theory, Vico's hypotheses foreshadowed several of the contemporary postulates which purport to explain the origin of language. The 'bow-wow' theory which proposes that "primitive words were onomatopoetic or imitative" brings to mind the first of the Vichian proposals on the origin of phonetic speech. The 'pooh-pooh' theory which embodies the hypothesis that "the first words were emitted during expressions of sensations or emotions, like pain or anxiety" bears a great resemblance to Vico's second

94. ibid., p.60. Cf. above, p.130.
95. The New Science, 455.
97. See above, p.133.
98. Silvano Arieti, op.cit., p.96.
suggestion. There is also a certain similarity between Langer's 'dance theory' and Vico's assertion that singing accelerated the evolution of phonetic speech. If merit is to be ascribed to the modern theories then the Vichian postulates are also worthy of commendation.

The actual course which Vico suggested language had followed in its evolution also has its modern adherents. The psychologist Silvano Arieti, for example, considers that language is a means of externalising thought and that

... the first symbolic externalizations of primordial man consisted of finger pointing and gestures. 102

He is, therefore, suggesting, as Vico had already done, that language employed physical entities before it became phonetic.

Vico's contention that the words of incipient speech were naturally related to the things they signified finds support in Cassirer. He considers that primitive language is always characterized by its "indifference of word and thing". In sign language he sees the germ of a higher form of language. The evidence from primitive societies, he argues, indicates that the more developed sign languages manifest a tendency to move from the merely imitative to a representative gesture. The next phase is that of the word.

Cassirer's conclusion on the overall order of the evolution of language is highly significant. It is so reminiscent of the Vichian conclusion that the similarity need not be remarked upon.

In general, language can be shown to have passed through three stages in maturing to its specific form ... In calling these the mimetic, the analogical, and the truly symbolical stage, we are for the present merely setting up an abstract schema — but this schema will take on concrete content when we see that it represents a functional law of linguistic growth... 106

99. See above, p.133.
100. See Silvano Arieti, op.cit., p.96.
101. See above, pp.133-4.
102. op.cit., p.93.
103. See above, pp.131-2.
105. ibid., p.184.
As with the other facets of his theory of language, Vico's analysis of the dynamics of language also has its contemporary advocates. Cassirer postulates a spontaneous origin followed by a natural growth. He asserts that insofar as one can gain an insight into the factors shaping language, they "seem closely related to primitive mythical concepts and classifications". It is, therefore, not surprising that Cassirer considers that the forces of imagination played a substantial role in the formation of language.

The role Vico ascribes to metaphor reappears in the thought of James M. Edie. He argues that metaphors originate in the practical need to progress from "known" (already distinguished, already named) phenomena to what is as yet unknown and unnamed. He ungrudgingly attributes the original discovery of this fact to Vico.

A consideration of the contemporary approach to the problem of language demonstrates that the importance and fruitfulness of the Vichian contribution in this sphere can not be overestimated. Vico was worthy of the great tribute paid him by Bruce Mazlish:

Vico's insight into language is comparable to Kepler and Galileo's inspiration in mathematics.

Vico's theory of language allowed him to use it in a new way - as a cultural artefact. This new approach enabled him to move beyond the prima facie message of ancient literature. Although his positive conclusions warrant a certain scepticism, his use of language was a valid means of procedure. Linguistic studies may be of little help in discerning the events of the remote reaches of prehistory (the palaeolithic and neolithic), but some of the now generally accepted conclusions on the events of proto-history, which Vico arrived at from linguistic considerations, demonstrate the legitimacy of his enterprise.

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108. ibid., p.297.
110. 'Expression and Metaphor', p.548.
111. loc.cit.
113. Vico's conclusions on The Twelve Tables for example.
CHAPTER IX

THE OBSCURE AGES

The Distinguishing Attributes of Human Society

Vico conceived history, not as a vast complexity of individuals and events, but as the process by which man makes himself. Hence the Vichian history was an account of how cultureless man developed culture. It is understandable, therefore, that his reconstruction of the historical process did not consist of an enumeration or catalogue of "facts". His method was to present an explanation of the origin of the historical process and to give an account of the various stages through which societies developed. His work, therefore, tended to be categorical rather than narrative. He was not concerned with individual men and trivial events but with a model and the operators within that model. Although he does on occasions tie his schema to the empirical history of Greece and Rome, for the most part he presents a description of the stages of his model. In Vico's terminology, he is basically concerned with the "ideal eternal history".

Since he conceived man to be essentially dynamic (of an evolving nature) Vico required some sort of criterion or criteria by which he could judge a creature human or otherwise. He made it clear at the beginning of his work that he was basically concerned with civil man. Hence it is not surprising that the criterion he adopted was of a social nature. He asserted that it was man's sense of communis, his sociality, that constituted his essential attribute. To

1. See Ch.V.
2. For further discussion of this point see Benedetto Croce, The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico, New York, 1913, p.151.
3. See Ch.V.
5. Ibid., 2. Criterial attributes such as tool-making were not considered by Vico and even if he had pondered such technological aspects it is reasonable to argue that he would have rejected them on the grounds that they were of too little 'human' import. It is interesting to note that Christopher Hawkes when making his four-fold division of inference from artefactual material argues for increasing 'human' import as one moves from the technological to the social and religious or spiritual levels. See 'Archaeological Theory and Method: Some Suggestions from the old World', American Anthropologist, 56, 1954, p.162. Gordon Childe is a further example of a prehistorian who thought the 'human' element important and substituted an economic (Hawkes' second level) for a technological interpretation of the Three Age System so that the human aspect would be more apparent. See 'Changing Methods and Aims in Prehistory', P.P.S., 1, 1935, pp.7-9.
be designated a man, however, a creature had not only to live in a society; it had to live in a human society.

It followed that the immediate problem facing Vico was not the classification of individuals but societies. When was a society human? It was human, asserted Vico, when it evidenced the practices of religion, marriage and burial:

We observe that all nations, barbarous as well as civilized ... keep these three human customs: all have some religion, all contract solemn marriages, all bury their dead. And in no nation, however savage and crude, are any human activities celebrated with more elaborate ceremonies and more sacred solemnity than religion, marriage and burial... it must have been dictated to all nations that from these three institutions humanity began among them all, and therefore they must be most devoutly observed by them all, so that the world should not again become a bestial wilderness. 6

Vico argued that it was these three customs which occasioned the emancipation of man from the tyranny of his bodily urges. Religion, the first of these customs to emerge, marked the birth of the human mind, the first human thought, and so instigated the beginnings of human liberty and development.

Vico's criteria for a human society are not quite as arbitrary nor as circular as Donagan would suggest. He invoked empirical foundations for his criterial attributes by citing in their support examples from individual historical communities. One may indict Vico for invalidly inferring to the general from too small a sample of particulars but not for circularity or arbitrariness. Both his awareness and his treatment of empirical data were clearly manifest when concrete examples seemed to militate against his proposals:

Let not our first principle be accused of falsehood by the modern travelers who narrate that peoples of Brazil, South Africa and other nations of the new world live in society without any knowledge of God ... These are travelers' tales, to promote the sale of their books... 12

7. ibid., 1098.
12. ibid., 334.
It is also of interest that he proposed etymological arguments to support his hypothesis:

Indeed *humanitas* in Latin comes first and properly from *humando*, "burying". 13

**The Age of the Giants**

The criteria of humanity having been established, Vico turned his attention to two vexing questions: whence came the creatures who were to become human; how did this humanising process (history) begin? To answer the former Vico invoked the biblical account; the latter he explained by means of natural phenomena.

The Vichian history was set within the framework of the chronology elaborated by Archbishop Ussher. Since Vico was only concerned with Gentile (non-Hebrew) history his account has the deluge as its lower chronological limit. He was not interested in the 'absolute' origins of man but simply in Gentile origins. The prediluvian had no part in his theories except insofar as he used it to explain the existence of the cultureless creatures with which history began.

Vico argued that before human history began, giants (semi-bestial, semi-human creatures) roamed the earth. The huge stature of these creatures was suggested by their physical remains, their artefacts, and also by ethnographic parallels. They were, he speculated, the end product of a process of degeneration that was concomitant with the period of feral wandering which followed the deluge:

14. It has been argued that Vico's recourse to *Genesis* was simply politic. Grimaldi argues that, in reality, Vico considered that man had a continuity with the 'lower' animals. See *The Universal Humanity of Giambattista Vico*, New York, 1958, p.146.
15. Archbishop Ussher was an Irishman. In 1636 he computed, using the bible, that the world had been created in 4004 B.C. This belief persisted well into the nineteenth century. See Geoffrey Bibby, *The Testimony of the Spade*, London, 1968, p.19.
The founders of gentile humanity must have been men of the races of Ham, Japheth and Shem, which gradually, one after the other, renounced that true religion of their common father Noah which alone in the family state had been able to hold them in human society by the bonds of matrimony and hence of the families themselves. As a result of this renunciation, they dissolved their marriages and broke up their families by promiscuous intercourse, and began roving wild through the great forest of the earth... By fleeing from the wild beasts with which the great forest must have abounded, and by pursuing women, who in that state must have been wild, indocile and shy, they became separated from each other in their search for food and water. Mothers abandoned their children, who in time must have come to grow up without ever hearing a human voice, much less learning any human custom, and thus descended to a state truly bestial and savage. Mothers, like beasts, must merely have nursed their babies, let them wallow naked in their own filth, and abandoned them for good as soon as they were weaned. And these children, who had to wallow in their own filth, whose nitrous salts richly fertilized the fields, and who had to exert themselves to penetrate the great forest, grown extremely dense from the flood, would flex and contract their muscles in these exertions, and thus absorb nitrous salts into their bodies in greater abundance. They would be quite without that fear of gods, fathers and teachers which chills and benumbs even the most exuberant in childhood. They must therefore have grown robust, vigorous, excessively big in brawn and bone, to the point of becoming giants. 20

It is clear that Vico did not use the word 'giant' to denote men of outlandish size but men of a stature commensurate with the build of the Germans described by Tacitus or the Patagonians of South America.

Although Vico stipulated that in the Middle East the period of 'giantism' endured a hundred years it is clear that this stage did not denote a sidereal time slot for he argued that in different places the Age of the Giants lasted much longer. During this stage these creatures lived off the natural fruits of the earth, there being no form of agriculture. If one can speak of an economy, it was a hunter-gatherer one, although there is some evidence to suggest that Vico considered that some were pastoralists. There was no form of society and individuals lived a nomadic life that differed little from the beasts of the field.
The Age of the Gods

Having accounted for the existence of the 'giants', Vico's next task was to explain why it was that these cultureless creatures began groping toward humanity. How were they reduced from their bestial state? Vico observed that the beginning of all nations appeared to be connected with religion. All nations seemed to have Jove or an equivalent. There were also reports that the first language had been a "language of the gods" and all human needs appeared to have a corresponding god. Vico considered, therefore, that there was reason to suspect that the beginning of history was associated with religion. His own personal experience had made him aware of the power of religion. He argued, therefore, that the only possible factor which could have set the 'giants' on a human course was religion:

Wherever a people has grown savage in arms so that human laws have no longer any place among it, the only powerful means of reducing it is religion.

It was the element of fear in primitive religion that rendered it so effective. It was not fear of other men that initiated civil life, but fear of a divinity:

In their monstrous savagery and unbridled bestial freedom there was no means to tame the former or bridle the latter but the frightful thought of some divinity, the fear of whom ... is the only powerful means of reducing to duty a liberty gone wild.

Religion, or fear of the supernatural, Vico argued, was a consequence of primitive man's inability to comprehend natural phenomena. It became effective when the first bolts of lightning appeared after the deluge. Vico had observed that all the 'Joves' of the various Gentile peoples were in some way connected with the sky, and more specifically with lightning:

27. *ibid.*, 193, 473-481.
29. *ibid.*, 175.
30. See Ch.III.
Jove hurls his bolts and fells the giants, and every gentile nation had its Jove. 34

This led him to suspect that the origins of the historical process were in some way connected with lightning. He suggested that it was not until some years after the deluge that lightning had appeared:

We postulate, and the postulate is reasonable, that for several hundred years the earth, soaked by the water of the universal flood, sent forth no dry exhalations or matter capable of igniting in the air to produce lightning. 35

When the earth did dry out and heaven "thundered and lightened", the bestial men were very much astonished. Since they did not understand this new phenomenon and because their mentality was quite imaginative they believed that the lightning was the effect of an angry god:

... [they] were frightened and astonished by the great effect whose cause they did not know, and raised their eyes and became aware of the sky. And because in such a case ... the nature of the human mind leads it to attribute its own nature to the effect, and because in that state their nature was that of men all robust bodily strength, who expressed their very violent passions by shouting and grumbling, they pictured the sky to themselves as a great animated body, which in that aspect they called Jove, the first god of the so-called gentes maiores, who by the whistling of his bolts and the noise of his thunder was attempting to tell them something. 38

It was in this fashion that Jove the lawgiver, who spoke by natural signs, was born. With his birth came religion, that practice which set bestial man on his course to humanity. It was lightning that gave rise to Jove, "the first human thought in the gentile world". Vico, therefore, concluded:

The second distinguishing attribute of a human society, marriage, was a direct product of bestial man's consciousness of the divinity and his innate sense of shame. The thundering Jove, they believed, was angry at their venery.

34. ibid., 193.
35. ibid., 192.
36. ibid., 9.
37. See Ch.VI.
39. i.e. natural phenomena such as lightning. Hence the science of divination. See ibid., 379.
40. ibid., 447.
41. Opere III, p.86.
42. ibid., p.50.
In their shame and desire to avoid the open skies (the watchful eye of Jove) they expressed their concupiscence in a different manner:

The new direction took the form of forcibly seizing their women ... dragging them into their caves, and, in order to have intercourse with them, keeping them there as perpetual lifelong companions. Thus, with the first human, which is to say chaste and religious, couplings, they gave a beginning to matrimony. Thereby they became certain fathers of certain children by certain women. Thus they founded the families... 43

Vico maintained that the third diagnostic attribute of a human society, that of burial, emerged from the stabilising influence brought about by religion and matrimony. These two practices instigated a more sedentary mode of existence. Burial of the dead, therefore, became a necessity:

Afterwards, the god-fearing giants ... must have become sensible of the stench from the corpses of their dead rotting on the ground nearby, and must have begun to bury them.... 44

In this fashion, then, Vico urged that the customs necessary for human society emerged. They had radical consequences both in the social and economic spheres. The most significant effect was the decline of nomadic style of life and the beginnings of a sedentary one. This in turn led to a decrease in "infamous communism" and the emergence of a society based on private property and all that it implies.

With the emergence of religion came the building of altars, places where the gods were appeased. In time these altars became sanctuaries, asylums where the weak could find refuge. Religion therefore had the effect of concentrating population which was a necessary condition for the emergence of towns. For their own protection the god-fearing giants (incipient man) established boundaries around their altars which were defended by force. In this way the notion of territory was born. Vico also considered that the word colere, to cultivate, indicated that the practice of agriculture was closely associated with the

43. The New Science, 1098.
44. Ibid., 529.
45. Ibid., 982.
46. See Ibid., 561.
47. Ibid., 550.
48. Ibid., 982.
emergence of religion:

... the first colere or cultivating in the world of the gentiles was the cultivation of the land, and the first cult was raising these altars... 49

Marriage also had a stabilising effect. Since a man now had a family to tend and support he lost mobility. He could no longer flee danger as he had once done but was forced to defend his frontiers. It was this lack of mobility and concentration of population that, in Vico's view, necessitated a new mode of economy:

Since they were settled on their lands and could no longer escape by flight ... in order to defend themselves and their families they had to kill the wild beasts that attacked them. And in order to provide sustenance for themselves and their families, as they had ceased foraging, they had to tame the earth and sow grain. 50

The practice of burial, Vico argued, also played its part in precipitating humanity. Graves became a sign of the ownership of, and the dominion over, land. Burial grounds were treated with such reverence that they became centres of worship, religious places par excellence. They therefore attracted refugees and so, like altars, had the effect of concentrating population. Vico contended that it was these centres that gave rise to the tribe:

Furthermore they must have fixed a stake as a burial marker ... The grave marker was called by the Greeks the phylax ... Phylax must accordingly have been the origin of the Greek phyle, a tribe. 53

The customs of religion, marriage and burial were therefore decisive. They gave rise to a sedentary way of life, concentrated population, engendered the notion of ownership and precipitated a new economy.

In Vico's schema, these three diagnostic human customs began to emerge in the Age of the Gods, a period of development which, in the Near East, began one hundred years after the deluge and endured for a further nine hundred years. The

49. ibid., 549.
50. ibid., 1098.
51. ibid., 531.
52. ibid., 529.
53. loc. cit.
54. ibid., 734, 736.
lower limits of this stage were therefore concomitant with the beginning of history.

Vico contended, and logically enough, that at this stage of his development man was little different from his condition in the Age of the Giants. He was still a rude creature, fierce, cruel and subject to his passions. What distinguished him in his new condition was his "terrible fear of the gods" which he himself had made. Society, such as it was, was structured around the immediate family for in those very early times it was relatively few who forsook their bestial ways to create a family. Each 'giant' withdrew as an individual and became both chief and priest to his own family. It was from these individual families that later, clans, tribes, peoples and nations were to develop. The economy on which the familial society subsisted was an agricultural one. The first peoples, Vico asserted, were "all composed of farmers". His contention that, in this period, man was ignorant of the art of metallurgy and that ploughs and weapons were made of wood seems to indicate that he believed the technology of this stage to be a wood-based one.

The Age of the Heroes

The Age of the Gods gave way to the Age of the Heroes, a stage which lasted some two hundred years in Greece. Vico dated its beginning at the corsair raids and Jason's naval expedition to Pontus and suggested that it came to an end with the return of Ulysses to Ithaca.

Vico maintained that this stage was ushered in by a radical change in the social structure. Indeed, he suggested that it marked the beginning of society

55. ibid., 916. It is this that gives the stage its name.
56. ibid., 250.
57. ibid., 982.
58. ibid., 732.
59. ibid., 16, 544.
60. ibid., 541, 562. Vico makes no mention of stone.
61. Vico's description, it would seem, borrows heavily from Lucretius and Tacitus.
63. ibid., 634.
in the proper sense of the word. This change was brought about by those bestial men who sought refuge at the altars of those who had already begun to be humanised:

Among the impious giants who had continued the infamous sharing of property and women, the quarrels produced by the sharing finally brought it about, at the end of a long period of time, that (to borrow the language of the jurists) Grotius's simpletons and Pufendorf's abandoned men had recourse to the altars of the strong to save themselves from Hobbes's violent men, even as beasts driven by intense cold will sometimes seek salvation in inhabited places. 65

Although these fugitives were received by the fathers (the heads of the pristine families) and given protection, Vico argued that they were not afforded equality with them. Since they brought with them nothing but their lives, they were assigned to the position of famuli. The fathers had embarked on a course of humanisation under the influence of religion and the desire to propagate the race. Vico considered these pious and gentle motives. It was for this reason that in the new structure they possessed the power of life and death and became heroes. The newcomers were impelled to embark on a human course for reasons of utility, a motivation which Vico deemed base and servile. Hence it was fitting that they should become the clients of the heroes. In return for the protection they received, they were forced to cultivate the fields and enjoyed a status which roughly approximated to that of a slave. Although a hero exercised absolute authority over the entire group (his own children and the famuli), his own children possessed a distinct social status. They constituted the libri, they were 'free

64. ibid., 555.
65. ibid., 553.
66. ibid., 18.
67. ibid., 555. Vico maintained that the heroes were little different in disposition from those who had preceded them:

Because of their recent gigantic origin, the heroes were in the highest degree awkward and wild ... very limited in understanding but endowed with the vastest imaginations and the most violent passions. Hence they must have been boorish, crude, harsh, wild, proud, difficult and obstinate ... bluff, touchy, magnanimous and generous, as Homer portrays Achilles, the greatest of all the Greek heroes. ibid., 708.

68. ibid., 555.
69. ibid., 258.
70. ibid., 18, 556.
citizens'. The famuli, on the other hand, had no rights and shared only the labours of the heroes, not their winnings, and still less their glory. 72

It is evident that Vico saw in this period the beginnings of a class society. The Age of Heroes, he urged, witnessed the emergence of a social structure that was something akin to the feudal system. As time went on the famuli became the plebeians of the heroic cities.

The concentration of population that was occasioned by the gathering of fugitives in a small area, Vico argued, led to the emergence of towns. It was the asylums that gave rise to cities. The survival of these larger communities was ensured by the famuli, for with their coming there were more labourers to work the land. Towns were therefore sustained by a more intensive agriculture: the first cities ... were all founded on cultivated fields.

Vico evidently deduced that the technology of metallurgy was discovered during the Age of the Heroes. He was aware that man had not always possessed the secret of working metal, for in the Age of the Gods it was unknown. Since Homer's heroes were well stocked with metal weapons, it must have been discovered in the Age of the Heroes.

It was in the Heroic Age, Vico argued, that the important phenomenon of colonisation began to appear. He maintained that two factors contributed to this movement: the desire to become rich and political struggles. The latter factor was the more important:

... we must conclude that these heroic contests gave the name to the heroic period; and that in these contests many chieftains, vanquished and humbled, were obliged to take to the sea with their followers and wander in search of other lands. 80

71. ibid., 556.
72. ibid., 559. Vico pointed to Tacitus' account of ancient German society as illustration and confirmation. See op.cit., p.122.
73. Vico's phrase was "ragione de' benefizi". See The New Science, 260.
74. ibid., 259.
75. ibid., 293, 561.
76. ibid., 16.
77. ibid., 16, 541, 544.
78. ibid., 546. See also Opere, III, pp.358-9.
80. ibid., 660.
Such groups established the first colonies. Queen Dido of Carthage led such an expedition:

We place her [Dido] at the end of the heroic age of the Phoenicians, and thus (conceive her to have been) driven out of Tyre because she had been conquered in a heroic contest, as she professes to have left the city on account of the hatred of her brother-in-law. This multitude of Tyrian men was called in heroic diction a woman because it was made up of the weak and vanquished. 81

Vico concluded that the struggle of the plebs (famuli) for equal rights signalled the end of the Age of Heroes. He argued that the heroes abused the laws of protection and governed their clients harshly. The plebs, after suffering abuse over a long period, rose in rebellion and laid claim to the land. 84 Since the heroes would not willingly relinquish their privileged position the agrarian contests ensued. The heroes joined forces to keep their clients in subjection; the plebs, however, would not be denied:

But with the passage of the years and the far greater development of human minds, the plebs of the peoples finally became suspicious of the pretensions of such heroism and understood themselves to be of equal human nature with the nobles, and therefore insisted that they too should be taken into the civil orders of the cities. 87

The ultimate victory of the plebs gave rise to a period of popular liberty - the Age of Man. This stage of human development Vico left to the conventional historian.

A Brief Assessment

Although there is a certain genius in Vico's account of the origin and early development of man, in this age of rigorous empiricism, it would take a very brave scholar indeed to defend his conclusions. If the details are left aside it would seem that there are at least two obvious and fundamental criticisms that can be directed at the Vichian synthesis. The first is its chron-
ological framework. Since the pioneer work of Boucher de Perthes and Charles Darwin, Archbishop Ussher's chronology has fallen into disrepute in scholarly circles. At best, then, Vico has severely telescoped human development.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty, however, is that Vico failed to present sufficient evidence to demonstrate the validity of his extremely novel and penetrating insights. Except for a few scattered ethnographical references, his account is singularly bereft of empirical confirmation. Although ethnographic material plays an important rôle in the work of contemporary prehistorians, its value as a source of verification is extremely dubious. Its prime significance is that it helps the scholar to overcome the limitations of his own cultural conventions and so provides a fertile source of hypothesis by suggesting the variety of possible factors which may underlie certain phenomena. Vico's use of ethnographic material as a source of hypothesis can only be lauded; his use of it to verify hypotheses must be treated with scepticism. In Vichian terminology, ethnographic parallels provide "philosophical" rather than "philological" proof.

Not only did Vico not verify his hypotheses; it is uncertain in what way or by what means he, or anyone else, could do so, for it would appear that most of his hypotheses are beyond the ken of the archaeologist. In 1954 Christopher Hawkes argued that it was possible to infer to four levels of human behaviour from archaeological phenomena; the technological; the economic; the socio-political; the spiritual-religious. He maintained that the more specifically human the behaviour became, the more difficult it was to infer to it from archaeological remains. The validity of inferences touching Hawkes' third and fourth categories is therefore considerably limited. It was precisely this sphere, however, which interested Vico. Indeed, it is obvious that the behaviour which preoccupied him belonged to the latter two categories of Hawkes' schema for in the first sentence of The New Science he stated:

88. He cites twenty six from Tacitus, seventeen from America, two from Africa, twelve from China and seven from the Indies.
90. See op.cit., pp.161-162.
As Cebes the Theban made a table of things moral, we here offer one of things civil. 91

It is not clear, therefore, that archaeological evidence can affirm or deny the validity of many Vichian propositions.

It has been suggested that the reconstruction of the human past is, of necessity, a task of philosophising. Vico was, first and foremost, a philosopher. Although he offered little convincing philological (empirical) verification of his postulates, he did present a philosophical (theoretical) one. In his treatment of the Homeric corpus, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, he demonstrated the fruitfulness, if not the validity, of his fundamental concepts.

91. The New Science, 1.
CHAPTER X

THE HOMERIC QUESTION

The Nature of Historical Knowledge

1 In a very persuasive article Harold Lee presents a cogent argument 'demonstrating' that all knowledge of past events is necessarily hypothetical. It is a view that finds sympathy with a great number of contemporary historians, especially with those who have scrutinized the scope and limits of their discipline, and one which, to my way of thinking, presents one of the more valid analyses of the nature of historical knowledge.

Most scholars would admit that the historian is one who is in some way concerned with the past. It is something with which he purports to deal, something that he knows existed, something which he is capable of explaining. The problem that arises, however, is how can this be at all possible. The past is gone, it no longer exists. How can it be observed or examined in any way?

If history is an empirical discipline, as most historians would suggest, the content of its propositions must be grounded on empirical observations. If the historian is as other men, it can only be presumed that his powers of observation are necessarily confined to the present, that is, he can only observe what now exists. The historian, therefore, must begin, not with the past, but with the present. Any past, then, which the historian constructs will necessarily be one which the present dictates.

Rather than study the past, the historian it would appear is one who examines presently observable things or events and explains their existence - the fact that they exist and why they exist precisely as they do - by postulating a past, a time before now, during which a certain state of affairs existed and in which certain specific events occurred. He observes certain phenomena - pots,
pans, stones shaped in a specific fashion, buildings, literature - which do not seem intelligible of themselves, that is, that the present of itself does not explain itself. As a man, he is aware of change, motion, duration - in a word, time. He is therefore led to postulate that there could be a time, beyond his memory span, during which events occurred. It is, he suggests, certain events which took place in this past that explain why the present is as it is.

On this analysis, the historian's past is a product of his present. It is not a past 'as it really was' nor 'a past in itself', but a past to which his phenomena (sometimes called evidence), when interpreted and criticised with the maximum degree of skill possible, commits him. It is a past that is irrevocably tied to the present and it is only insofar as the former has impinged on the latter that the historian, qua historian, can have any knowledge of it. A past which has not affected the present can only be unknowable and consequently meaningless to the historian. R. G. Collingwood has expressed it in very succinct fashion:

... the past simply as the past is unknowable; it is the past as residually preserved in the present that is alone knowable. 4

If this very summary exposition is accepted it becomes evident that the historian's past is of an inferential nature. Every statement about the past, even that there is a past (beyond the span of the individual historian's memory), becomes an hypothetical construct, a theory, that purports to explain a present state of affairs. The prehistorian, for example, recovers a piece of stone, with peculiar attributes, in a specific deposit. He can only explain this phenomenon by suggesting that at a time now past man employed stone tools. If his observations are exhaustive he may be able to use the stone's attributes to conjecture quite a number of things about the past. All his statements about the past, however, remain hypotheses, inferences that purport to explain a present state of affairs.

3. For a more ample discussion of this facet see R.G. Collingwood, 'The Limits of Historical Knowledge', Philosophy, 3, 1928, p.218.
4. ibid., p.220.
Since the historian cannot directly observe the past he cannot verify the validity (or fallaciousness) of his inferences in the manner of the natural scientist. Despite this state of affairs, historians do speak of checking their accounts and testing their conclusions. Some accounts are rejected as untenable, others are accepted. What is the historian doing, then, when he checks?

It would appear that the historian, when he speaks of testing his hypotheses, is merely testing or checking the internal consistency of his argument. Since he does not know, and cannot know, the past 'as it was' there is no external criterion by which he can assess the truth or falsity of his propositions. All he can do is check the logic of his thesis and evaluate the success with which it does or does not explain the existence of the observable phenomena (the evidence). It would seem apparent, then, that 'the evidence' has a twofold role: it is that which explains and that which is explained. The evidence is explained by the hypothesis and the hypothesis is explained by the evidence. It is, therefore, the reservoir from which the historian derives his explanatory postulates and, most importantly, the test of those postulates. The adequacy or inadequacy of an historical account, it would seem, is to be determined by the extent to which it explains the evidence - the success it has in rendering intelligible, observable phenomena.

The Homeric Phenomenon

The phenomenon which Vico employed to vindicate his historical account, his theories and postulates, was the Homeric corpus - the Iliad and the Odyssey. His treatment of the Homeric question in Book III of The New Science is not a contingency, an accidental addendum to the work, but forms an integral part of the entire argument. There is every reason to accept Fisch's opinion when he states

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5. Collingwood develops this point well. See ibid., p.216.
6. For a more elaborate discussion of this point see Jerry Stannard, 'The Role of Categories in Historical Explanation', Journal of Philosophy, 56, 1959, p.436. Although this view manifests a certain circularity it is not apparent how it can be avoided.
that Vico's Homeric criticism is simply an application of his general theory of
poetry to a specific problem, or even Caponigri's suggestion that
no shadow of doubt is left but that, to Vico's mind, under a certain
aspect at least, the 'discovery of the true Homer' and the project
of the 'New Science' constitute members of a single argument. 8

The Homeric phenomenon was one that had engrossed scholars since the time
of Plato. It was therefore an ancient dispute into which Vico entered, but one
which he considered quite suitable to his programme. In the problem itself he
found a supreme testing ground for his theories, concepts and models. In the
solution he presented he saw vindicated not only his speculative and methodologi-
cal presuppositions but also compelling evidence that the epics were an effect-
ive instrument for positive research into the remote past.

The use of the Homeric corpus for this purpose was eminently suitable for
Vico's designs. He considered that Homer was the most ancient author whose work
had survived. He was therefore the author closest in time to that period in
which Vico was most interested. The Iliad and the Odyssey were also the source
which provided much of the stimulus and inspiration for the construction of his
interpreative concepts and models. It was therefore in a sense logical that

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   It is a problem that has continued to vex Western scholars. Witness the
   comment of a nineteenth-century author:
   During five and twenty hundred years this enquiry has occupied the
   subtlest investigators of every age. On no other similar subject
   have more strange or conflicting theories been proposed, more
   voluminous commentaries expended, or a keener spirit of controversy
   displayed; on none, perhaps, has the lavish exuberance of speculat-
   ive inquiry been more barren hitherto of positive results.
   William Mure (1854), quoted by C.G. Thomas (ed.), Homer's History, New York,
   1970, p.1. George Steiner considers that the twentieth century has not
   witnessed a change in the situation:
   ... the stubborn truth remains; today the Homeric question is not
   much nearer solution than it was in 1795, when Wolf published his
   Prolegomena ad Homerum.
10. For further discussion of this point see A.R. Caponigri, op.cit., pp.9, 191.
Vico should employ these two outstanding works to test his hypotheses. Since there was no external or independent criterion, no 'past-as-it-really-was', which could be used to verify his conclusions, he could only evaluate the validity or fruitfulness of his constructs by scrutinising them in the light of what they purported to explain - the Homeric phenomenon. If his theories gave a more adequate explanation of the peculiarities of the Iliad and the Odyssey than any of the previous theories in this field, they would lay serious claim to being a valid historical explanation and so vindicate the hypotheses on which they were based.

The two and a half millennia which had elapsed since the Homeric poems first appeared had witnessed many attempts to explain their existence. The majority of generally accepted explanations suggested that both poems were the product of one hand, the work of one sublime poet, an historical individual who had traversed the ancient world and had lived at a specific time, although there was little agreement when this was. Some argued that he had been an eyewitness of the Trojan war, others that he had lived anything up to four centuries later. In most cases it was believed that the epics were the product of a reflective mind, compositions rich in esoteric or philosophical wisdom, knowledge that had been gleaned from the Egyptians and Phoenicians. The poems were thought to be allegorical in nature and consequently a source of moral guidance. Perhaps the facet of the Homeric corpus that was least debated was the contention that it was the work of an unsurpassed poet.

Vico's Rejection of the Conventional Homeric Theories

Vico considered such a view to be quite unsatisfactory since it failed to

12. The general conclusion of scholars puts the appearance of the poems in the late eighth century B.C.
explain a number of aspects relating to Homer and the Homeric writings. Vico observed that almost all the cities of Greece claimed to be Homer's birthplace. He also noted that the opinions expressed on the age of Homer (when he lived) are so numerous and varied that "the divergence extends to 460 years". If Homer was an historical individual how were these geographical and chronological discrepancies to be explained. He could not have been born in all the places that laid claim to him nor could he have lived for four hundred and sixty years.

The conventional theories also failed to explain the obvious differences between the Iliad and the Odyssey. Vico pointed out the geographical dichotomy of the two poems: one was set in the North-East of Greece, the other in the South-West. He further suggests that

... the difference we can observe between the styles of the two poems is infinite. 17

Some of the ancient writers had been unable to ignore the apparent diversity and had offered various solutions. Dionysius Longinus, for example, had suggested that Homer had "composed the Iliad in his youth and the Odyssey in his old age". Vico remarked in somewhat ironic fashion that this was a strange detail to be known about a man of whom we do not know the two most important historical facts, namely when and where he lived, regarding which Longinus has left us in the dark in his discussion of the greatest luminary of Greece. 19

Even if Longinus' suggestion were accepted it would only explain the differences between the two poems. It would not account for the internal dichotomies manifest in each epic. It was these internal divergencies which puzzled Vico:

Yet we do not see how to reconcile so many refined customs with the many wild and savage ones which he attributes to his heroes at the

19. *loc.cit.* Vico speculated that the reason for Longinus' conjectures was that in the Iliad Homer depicted the wrath and pride of Achilles, the attributes of youth, while in the Odyssey are to be found the wiles and cunning of the aged. Since a work usually mirrored its author, the former was written in his youth, the latter in the fullness of his years. See *ibid.*, 868. For Plato's solution, see *ibid.*, 879. For a modern view that approximates to Plato's, see George Steiner, *op.cit.*, p.84.
same time, and particularly in the Iliad.

A further facet of the Homeric epics that previous theories, in Vico's opinion, failed to explain satisfactorily was their coarse and unseemly content, not to mention their wild and savage comparisons. Should a philosopher tell of the atrocius barbarities practised by the ancient Greeks? It was Homer's portrayal of these indecencies which had occasioned the indignation of certain scholars. Some had argued that Homer wrote in this fashion so that he would be understood by the common people. Vico rejected the validity of this explanation on the grounds that Homer was too proficient in his descriptions. If the savage and truculent style of the poems was to be considered a concession to the vulgar, why was Homer so adept. If one considered the style and content as a lapse on Homer's part, one rendered accidental to the Iliad and Odyssey precisely those features which made them sublime.

It was, indeed, the very sublimity of the poems that the conventional theories failed to explain. It was the wondrous nature of the epics which had occasioned Aristotle to regard "the Homeric lies as without equal" and Horace to proclaim that Homer was inimitable and incomparable. This facet of the Homeric corpus had been a perennial cause of awe. Although the sublimity of Homer's poetry had always been remarked upon, no one had ever indicated why it should be so.

In Vico's opinion, then, all previous solutions to the Homeric problem were defective, for they did not adequately explain many aspects of the Homeric corpus which were still observable. Vico believed that he could present an acceptable solution, one that would render the epics intelligible, and in so doing he considered that his interpretative concepts would in a very real sense be vindicated.

21. ibid., 667, 781, 784. See The Iliad, p.404. Also The Odyssey, p.32.
24. loc.cit.
25. ibid., 785, 827, 836.
Vico's Solution to the Homeric Problem

Vico considered that any solution to the Homeric question must come from Homer himself. In other words the answer to the problem could only be gained by means of internal criticism. Since the Homeric writings were the earliest that had survived, the use of authors such as Plutarch and Herodotus were to be eschewed. Since they had lived at a much later date than Homer they were not in a position to be aware of the details of his life, nor were they likely to have appreciated the spirit which dominated his compositions. Having rejected all testimony regarding Homer and his works Vico was left with only the Homeric corpus. It was an examination of this corpus itself, however, which he believed would clear up the peculiarities surrounding it.

To proceed in this manner, however, necessitated the use of interpretative concepts and models for the epics themselves did not make any direct statements on how, when, or by whom they were composed. Any information bearing on these matters must be inferred. The need for some theoretical framework was accordingly essential, Vico proceeded to interpret the poems by means of his poetic theories - he examined them as poetic (in the Vichian sense) products. In The Autobiography he records how he began to read

... the poems of Homer in the light of his principles of philology; and by certain canons of mythology which he had conceived, he gives these poems an aspect different from that which they have hitherto borne, and shows how divinely the poet weaves into the treatment of his two subjects two groups of Greek stories, the one belonging to the obscure period and the other to the heroic period ...

In Vico's view, the fundamental assumption which had been responsible for nullifying all attempts to solve the Homeric problem was the belief that Homer had been a philosopher, a civilised man, a man of abstract, reflective wisdom. Plato perpetrated this fallacy and subsequent scholars had blindly followed in his wake.

29. Ibid., 867. A 'Life of Homer' had been attributed to both these authors.
30. See Ch.VI.
32. The New Science, 780.
Homer, however, was in no sense a philosopher, the philosophical content attributed to the epics being fabrications of later scholars:

... the philosophers did not discover their philosophies in the Homeric fables but rather inserted them therein. 33

Vico's reasons for suspecting that Homer was in no sense a philosopher were numerous. The very fact that he was an extremely ancient author led him to conjecture that he may have been poetic. Since he lived at a time when humanity was in its early stages of development, Vico's cultural approach necessitated that Homer himself should resemble his fellows and hence be rude and primitive.

A further reason for believing Homer poetic was the nature of the characters in the epics. Vico considered these brash and undisciplined,

... like boys in the frivolity of their minds, like women in the vigor of their imaginations and like turbulent youths in the boiling fervor of their wrath... 35

He pondered whether such creations could be the "natural product of a calm, cultivated and gentle philosopher". He came to the conclusion that they rather befitted one who was possessed of the poetic mind, of a 'primitive' mentality.

The moves depicted in the epics Vico also found inconsistent with Homer being a philosopher. The customs and practices attributed to the gods and heroes, even to the prudent Ulysses, he considered most improper if Homer was a moral philosopher. Granted that Homer descended to the level of the common people, why did he arouse such admiration for, and take pleasure in recounting, such activities?

A further difficulty for the conventional theories was the style in which the poems were written. Was it the style of a civilised man? Vico found it impossible that the

... truculent and savage style in which he [Homer] describes so many, such varied and such bloody battles, so many and such extravagantly cruel kinds of butchery as make up all the sublimity of the Iliad in particular ... originated in a mind humanized and softened by any philosophy. 41

33. ibid., 901.
34. ibid., 780.
36. ibid., 828.
37. ibid., 787.
38. ibid., 786. See The Iliad, p.390.
40. The New Science, 782.
41. ibid., 785.
Even if the Homeric epics did embody lofty truths the form in which they were expressed was not that of an "orderly and serious mind such as befits a philosopher".

Vico concluded that the characters and customs depicted in the poems were typical of the first two stages of cultural evolution while the style of the author indicated that he too lived in a similar period. Although the characters, customs and style were discordant with a "civil human nature" they were "perfectly decorous in relation to the punctilious heroic nature". Because it was impossible to be a poet and a philosopher at the same time, Vico considered that his hypothesis was vindicated. Homer was a man of the people, a poet in the Vichian sense, not a philosopher.

If the conclusion that Homer was a primitive man was accepted, much of the Homeric corpus was rendered intelligible. It explained the base sentences, the vulgar customs, the crude comparisons and other improprieties and impossibilities. The ineptitudes and indecencies were merely the effects of the awkwardness with which the early Greek peoples endeavoured to express themselves in their formative period. They occurred of necessity because they were the only tools at Homer's disposal.

It also explained why Homer was unrivalled as a poet. Vico considered Homer the oldest surviving author, closest in time to that poetic period when man had been 'all sense and vigorous imagination'. Since he was possessed of this nature to a greater extent than any author who came after him, he was of necessity unsurpassable. Homer had lived at the end of the Heroic Age. All other authors had therefore lived in the Age of Man. Consequently most of their poetic powers

42. ibid., 831.
43. ibid., 783. That the content was philosophical was not a real possibility. A philosophical content expressed in a poetic form presumed a sophistication which Vico, in view of his evolutionary approach, would not admit to primitive man.
44. ibid., 821.
45. ibid., 806.
46. ibid., 882-885, 874.
47. ibid., 830.
48. Since Vico's day literary sources of a more ancient date have come to light.
49. See below, p. 172.
had been replaced by reflective abilities. When compared with Homer it was not surprising that they fell short. Homer's characters were poetic figures, imaginative universals. Ulysses was the embodiment of all the heroic virtues (warsness, patience, dissimulation, duplicity, deceit) while the character of Achilles gave concrete expression to all the attributes of the valiant man (quick temper, punitiousness, wrathfulness, implacability, violence, arrogance). Homer was unrivalled as a poet because he was the only example of an author who has survived from the naturally poetic period.

Homer: a Poetic Character

To solve the apparent geographical and chronological difficulties inherent in the epics, Vico carried his theory to more radical lengths. If the poems were poetic products was it not possible that Homer was a composite character, similar in nature to Orpheus or Hermes Trismegistus? It was evident that if the epics were examined with this assumption in mind, many of the geographical and chronological inconsistencies would dissolve.

Vico did, in fact, assert that Homer was a poetic character. He was the universal rhapsode, the bardic type, the name under which all the unknown poets who had contributed to the making of the Iliad and Odyssey were subsumed. Hence the Homeric corpus was a composite product, the work of at least two hands.

Vico's reading of the Odyssey confirmed him in this view. There, he found mention of "speakers" who told stories "like a musican or singer". These were the oral poets who sang at the banquets of the great. Tradition had it that these singers traversed Greece, recounting at fairs and festivals the epic deeds of the past. Hence the stories they sang

... must certainly have been collected from none other than their own peoples. 55

50. See Ch.VI.
51. The New Science, 809.
52. Ibid., 849. See The Odyssey, pp.123, 181.
54. Ibid., 851, 872.
55. Ibid., 852.
The outstanding peculiarity of these bards seemed to have been their blindness. Vico found this attribute eminently suitable for those in question for he considered it

... a property of human nature that the blind have marvellously retentive memories. 56

A blind man would therefore be especially well equipped to be a rhapsode.

Vico argued that there was a similar tradition surrounding Homer. Indeed, many of the characteristics of the rhapsodes were also predicated of Homer. He was reported to have left none of his poems in writing, to have wandered through Greece singing his poems, and to have been blind. Vico also appealed to the etymological derivation of "Homer". Homeros, he argued, was derived from homoe, "together", and eirein, "to link". A homeros, then, was a "putter together of fables". He concluded, therefore, that there were grave reasons for associating Homer with the oral poets of ancient Greece. Granted the chronological and geographical difficulties presented by 'Homer', and given Vico's theory of poetic characters, it was but a simple step to declare Homer a poetic character, the universal rhapsode. Such a postulate, it appeared to Vico, would account for the many dichotomies found in the Homeric corpus.

Since the oral poets traversed Greece one would expect them to gather their stories from various and diverse communities. Consequently, the Homeric epics, which were a compilation of such stories contained elements from many different societies. It was for this reason that the poems contained diverse geographical backgrounds and explained why many of the cities of Greece claimed Homer as a native son. They saw in the epics part of their own culture.

The conception of Homer in terms of a poetic character, as the type bard, also

56. ibid., 871. See The Odyssey, p.123.
57. The New Science, 850. See Josephus, Against Apion, I, 12.
58. The New Science, 872.
59. ibid., 869.
60. ibid., 852.
61. See Ch.VI.
63. ibid., 875.
solved the chronological problems. Since the rhapsode had continued to practise his art over a period of several centuries, given Vico's hypothesis, it was not surprising that 'Homer' lived some five centuries. Homer lived while the art of epic, oral poetry survived.

Although it is clear from Vico's argument that he considered Homer a poetic character, he also uses the term 'Homer' to denote an historical individual. The Homer he discusses in this context would appear to be the redactor or compiler of the poems. Since the redactor was an historical figure Vico believed that he could be assigned a fixed date. In the customs depicted he finds evidence to indicate that such a person must have emerged rather late in the evolution of Greek society. Many of the practices which appeared in the epics were tinged with a refinement, luxury and pomp which showed that Greek society had reached an advanced stage in their cultural development. A further reason for suggesting a comparatively late date for the redactor of the poems was that

... the arts of casting in bas-relief and of engraving on metals had already been invented. 68

Vico observed, however, that Homer never mentioned "vulgar Greek letters". From this he concluded that the redactor had lived before the epistolary form of writing emerged among the Greeks. He was reinforced in this conclusion by instances in the epics which appeared to indicate that a form of hieroglyphic writing was in vogue. Hence Vico concluded that the matter of the poems stemmed from anonymous poets of a very remote period, while their form was derived from a redactor who had lived before the age of man but late in the age of the heroes,

64. ibid., 876.
65. See ibid., 803.
66. ibid., 793-802. See The Iliad, pp.65, 444; The Odyssey, pp.110, 114-15, 132.
68. ibid., 794. Vico possessed some notion of a technological evolution but he fails to elaborate it in detail. See Ch.IX.
69. ibid., 859.
70. ibid., 680, 681. See The Iliad, pp.42, 349. H.C. Baldry argues that alphabetic script began to emerge in Greece in the eighth century B.C., i.e. the period to which Vico assigns Homer (the redactor). See Ancient Greek Literature in its Living Context, London, 1968, p.30.
The Effect of Vico's Proposals

By positing at least a dual authorship for the poems, Vico was able to present a credible solution to the problems raised by the manifest differences between the two epics. Since both poems had not been written or rather, composed by the one person, the dichotomy they evidenced was only to be expected, despite the efforts of the redactor. The stark customs depicted in the Iliad reflected a very early period of cultural evolution. The Odyssey with its tales of the cunning Ulysses depicted a stage when man had lost much of his spontaneity and gained in reflective powers. This indicated to Vico that the Iliad had appeared many centuries before the Odyssey.

The theory of a composite authorship was also appealing in that it accounted for the various divergencies within each epic. If the Iliad and the Odyssey were products of an evolutionary process, the result of many indigenous stories which over a long period of time were welded into two substantial epics, the presence of seemingly incompatible practices within each was only natural. Since each epic only crystallised after a long period of flux they necessarily reflected diverse customs.

Vico's solution to the Homeric problem, then, involved the application of his theory of poetry. Indeed, he himself stated that an answer could not be found elsewhere than in the origin of poetry, as discovered above in the Poetic Wisdom, and consequently in the discovery of the poetic characters....

The Homeric corpus was fundamentally a poetic work, the fruit of many minds which

71. The New Science, 803. Vico himself was of the opinion that the Trojan war as a single, discrete, historical event, never took place. It too was a poetic character, a type name that subsumed under it all the conflicts between the Greeks and the Trojans. See ibid., 873.
72. ibid., 804, 880. Cf. ibid., 218.
73. ibid., 793, 797.
74. ibid., 808.
had been reduced to the form of two substantial epic poems by a redactor in the eighth century B.C. Homer, the alleged historical individual who was reputed to have composed the epics from beginning to end had never existed.

Now all these things reasoned out by us or related by others concerning Homer and his poems ... now compel us to affirm that the same thing has happened in the case of Homer as in that of the Trojan war, of which the most judicious critics hold that though it marks a famous epoch in history it never in the world took place. 75

It did not follow that Homer was a complete fabrication. He was a poetic character, the universal rhapsode. He was the Greek people insofar as they sang their history:

And certainly if ... there did not remain of Homer certain great vestiges in the form of his poems, the great difficulties would lead us to conclude that he was a purely ideal poet who never existed as a particular man in the world of nature. But the many great difficulties on the one hand, taken together with the surviving poems on the other, seem to force us to take the middle ground that Homer was an idea or a heroic character of Grecian men insofar as they told their history in song. 76

In Vico's view, then, the Greek peoples themselves were Homer. In a sense Longinus had been right. The Iliad was the story of their youth; the Odyssey the account of their more mature years. The Homeric corpus was, in fact, the autobiography of the very ancient Greek peoples. It was for this reason that all the Greek communities vied with each other for the honour of being his fatherland, and why almost all claimed him as citizen. 79

It was for similar reasons that the period occupied by his life was so disputed:

That the reason why opinions as to his age vary so much is that our Homer truly lived on the lips and in the memories of the peoples of Greece throughout the whole period from the Trojan war down to the time of Numa, a span of 460 years. 80

Vico could not overemphasise the importance of his discovery. Because

75. ibid., 873.
76. loc.cit.
77. See above p. 165.
78. The New Science, 879.
79. ibid., 875.
80. ibid., 876.
81. ibid., 156.
scholars had failed to appreciate the true nature of the Homeric writings and
their author they were unable to grasp their full implications. Consequently,
they remained ignorant of the vast historical significance of the poems.

But the same fate has befallen the poems of Homer as the Law of the
Twelve Tables; for, just as the latter, having been held to be the
laws given by Solon to the Athenians and subsequently taken over by
the Romans, has up to now concealed from us the history of the natural
law of the heroic nations of Latium, so the Homeric poems, having
been regarded as works produced by a single supreme poet, have hitherto
concealed from us the history of the natural law of the nations of
Greece. 82

Vico urged that as soon as it was realised that the Homeric corpus was an
 evolutionary product - a composite of many indigenous stories that ranged over a
prolonged period - its value as a source for the history of remote antiquity be­
came immediately apparent. The Iliad and the Odyssey, conceived in Vichian terms,
became "two great treasure stores" for anyone wishing to enquire into the remote
past. With the discovery of the 'true Homer' the obscure period became open to
investigation. It appeared that Vico had reached his goal - a means for reaching
the most ancient past:

Unknown until now, he [Homer] has held hidden from us the true facts
of the fabulous period among the nations, and much more so those of
the obscure period which all had despaired of knowing, and consequent­
ly the first true origins of the things of the historic period. 84

The Merit of the Vichian Solution

Although Vico's contribution in the field of Homeric studies is seldom
recognised, many of his 'factual' conclusions are paralleled by modern scholars.
The question of the authorship of the poems has been ceaselessly debated and theor­
ies purporting to explain it appear to vary with the seasons. Victor Berard

82. ibid., 904. The Roman Law of the Twelve Tables was the other important area
of positive Vichian research.
83. loc.cit.
84. ibid., 6.
85. C.G. Thomas is one who recognises Vico's contribution. See op.cit., pp.2-3.
It is generally maintained that Wolf's Prologomena ad Homerum was the first
significant contribution in this area. See George Steiner, op.cit., p.77.
Harry Levin, however, is closer to the mark when he states that it was Vico
who made the first noteworthy contribution in the field. See James Joyce,
expressed the situation as it was in his day:

I have known the time when the last absurdity for the student of Homer was to believe in the existence of the author whose works he read. Today, what greater sign of ignorance than to venture to doubt that the Iliad and Odyssey were composed, first lines to last, by the Poet who was blind. 86

The situation seems to have changed somewhat since the 1930's. The pendulum has swung the other way and theories propounding a composite or dual authorship are once again in vogue. G. S. Kirk, for example, one of the more celebrated of contemporary Homeric scholars, argues that the linguistic, stylistic and chronological anomalies can only be explained if the epics are conceived as evolutionary products. He suggests, however, that certain facets of the poems indicate the influence of a single individual. For this reason he tends to argue that each poem had its own redactor. Kirk, then, argues for at least a dual authorship and concludes that the Odyssey, because of its greater structural sophistication post-dated the Iliad by two or three generations.

The majority of contemporary scholars also stress the importance of appreciating the oral origins of the epics. Once again, G. S. Kirk:

When all is said, this important point remains: that the Iliad and Odyssey are in essence oral poetry, the end product of a long tradition of songs improvised by illiterate but highly skilled singers. 92

H. C. Baldry also emphasises the importance of being aware of the oral beginnings of the poems. He argues that they took their origin from the aoides, the story singers, who preceded the rhapsodes.

It need scarcely be stated that the bulk of modern scholarship conceives the epics in an evolutionary perspective. In an age that 'worships the god of evolut-
ion' there are only divergent opinions as to how, and over what period of time, this process took place. Although the contents of the poems may reflect incidents as early as the thirteenth century B.C. it is generally asserted that the form in which the Iliad and Odyssey now exist emerged at quite a late stage in the evolution of narrative verse. It is usually suggested that the epics received their present form in the latter part of the eighth century B.C.

There is little debate that the Homeric corpus contains historical data. The major issues for contention in this area seem rather to be the exact period it does reflect. Some argue for a Mycenaean basis while others reject it. Kirk argues that it reflects the history of at least three periods:

... first, the late Bronze Age, the period of the Trojan war and the last generations of Mycenae's greatness; second, the early Iron Age, the so called Dark Age of the eleventh and tenth centuries ... and third, the age of large scale composition of the poems in Iona, probably the eighth century B.C.

Although the ultimate solution to the Homeric problem has undoubtedly not yet been reached, and probably never shall be, it can be seen that Vico's analysis is well supported by contemporary theories. Modern hypotheses on the authorship question indicate the penetrating nature of Vico's contribution in this sphere. His postulates bearing on the oral and evolutionary nature of the epics have also been reinforced and he is not alone in stressing the value of the epics as media through which the historian can approach the 'obscure ages'. In view of this, then, Bruce Mazlish is on firm enough ground when he asserts that Vico's Homeric studies were his "greatest triumph".

The Vichian Homeric theory, even by modern standards, went far toward solving the problems inherent in the Homeric corpus. Insofar as it did this, it vindicated,

96. H.C. Baldry, op.cit., p.11.
99. Since the emergence of archaeology as a discipline the singular importance of Homer in this sphere has diminished.
100. The Riddle of History, New York, 1966, p.32.
in some very real sense, the fruitfulness if not the validity of the concepts and models upon which it was based. Vico's solution was not simply a "profound intuition to which only later scholars could do justice" but a theory based on Vichian postulates. By rendering the Homeric writings intelligible his theory not only justified his whole speculative and theoretical programme; it also demonstrated that the epics were a primary document for the examination of remote antiquity.

CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSION: VICO - HIS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE PREHISTORIAN AND ANTHROPOLOGIST

In the introduction to this thesis a number of disciplines were enumerated in which Vico, according to the scholars active in those fields, is considered an extremely seminal thinker. The tributes paid Vico from thinkers in so many diverse areas have led James Edie to exclaim:

If we look at some of the more extensive bibliographies consecrated to his historical influence, we sometimes wonder whether Vico has not been responsible for the entire intellectual state of the contemporary world in all its vagaries and contradictions as well as in its more progressive and positive aspects.

In view of the history of Vichian thought this attitude (an attitude which Edie is actually attacking) is somewhat paradoxical. It would appear that Vico's synthesis was almost totally ignored in the century that followed his death. This state of affairs has led some to ponder: does this mean that his thought was without authentic influence; or does it mean that it spread in a mysterious fashion and had an anonymous influence? There are solid grounds for answering either question in the affirmative. Indeed, both the tributes of twentieth-century admirers of Vico and the history of his thought indicate that, with the exception of Michelet, Vico failed to have a significant impact till the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Among Vico's greatest admirers was his fellow Neapolitan, Benedetto Croce. On one occasion the latter referred to him as "neither more nor less than the nineteenth century in germ"; on another, "the nineteenth century in embryo". A similar attitude was expressed by Bertrand Russell, an observer.

3. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to present a detailed examination of possible Vichian influence. For the following brief summary of the history of his thought I have therefore drawn liberally on the work of his more reputable commentators.
who might be considered more impartial than Croce:

The importance of Vico lies ... in his uncanny foreshadowing of the nineteenth century... 6

Perhaps the tribute of Paul Hazard, the French historian, is without parallel:

If only Italy had lent an ear to Giambattista Vico; if only, as at the time of the Renaissance, she had assumed the leadership of Europe, our intellectual history would have had a very different tale to tell. 7

Although these acclamations are laudatory and reflect the attitude of scholars from vastly different backgrounds, they simply recognise Vico as a very seminal thinker. None of them suggest that he had been a driving force in the emergence of the western tradition. Indeed, Hazard's remark implies that he has been very much without influence.

There has been very little meticulous work carried out on the diffusion of Vichian thought. Present signs, however, would indicate that no one of renown appreciated Vico's achievements before Jules Michelet spoke enthusiastically of them in the early nineteenth century.

During his lifetime it appears that Vico encountered nothing but incomprehension. On the publication of the *Scienza Nuova Prima* he wrote to a friend:

In this city I reckon that I have sent it to the desert, and I avoid all the main centres so as not to meet the people to whom I have sent copies, and if I can not avoid them, I greet them hastily: and when that happens none of them give any sign of having received it, and so confirm me in my opinion that I have sent it to the desert. 9

Although his argument bearing on the Law of the Twelve Tables was attacked and defended during his lifetime, the failure of Pietro Giannone to make

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8. See Ch.III.
mention of him indicates that his ideas failed to make a significant impact on contemporary thought. There is reason to believe that during Vico's lifetime both Montesquieu and Rousseau procured copies of *The New Science*. It does not appear however that either attached great significance to, or even read, the work.

In his introduction to *The Autobiography* Max Fisch isolates a number of instances which appear to indicate that Vico was known and read in the eighteenth century. He was, for example, the centre of the controversy between the Ferini and Anti-Ferini which came to a head in Italy between 1760 and 1780. Although Fisch presents numerous examples of authors who probably read Vico, and cites instances of the possible influence of his ideas in the eighteenth century, he concludes that during this period there was a failure "to grasp Vico's thought as an integral whole".

It is generally considered that Michelet's discovery of Vico in the 1820's was "the decisive event for Vico's European reputation". Isaiah Berlin is of the opinion that Michelet was the first really to appreciate "that Vico had opened a window to a new realm of thought". Michelet recalled that

> From 1824 on, I was seized by a frenzy caught from Vico, an incredible intoxication with his great historical principle. 17

In 1827 he published an abridged translation of *The New Science* under the title "Principes de la philosophie de l'histoire", a work which Flint has called a translation of genius. Even Italians found the latter work more intelligible than the former. It was Michelet's translation that established Vico's European reputation.

The ferment initiated by Michelet was brought to a climax by Croce in the

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13. The Ferini argued that man had a bestial origin.
14. *op.cit.*, p.64.
15. *ibid.*, p.75.
17. Quoted by Max Fisch, *op.cit.*, p.76.
first decade of the present century. His task was made so much easier by the demise of the 'cult of pure reason'. An age under the influence of Descartes and Newton would find little of value in the Vichian approach. Hence the disillusion with rationalism and positivism that was manifest in the emergence, in the late nineteenth century, of existentialism and its historical equivalent, historicism, ensured for Vico a favourable and sympathetic hearing.

The effect of this century 'in the wilderness' was to mitigate, almost to extinguish, the Vichian impact. When he was 'rediscovered', scholars ... did not so much learn from him as recognise in him what was already their own, and acknowledge him as the great forerunner of doctrines and causes to which they were already committed. 21

In the century following Vico's death European thought reached a position similar to his own, yet independently of him. He was then recognised as a highly original thinker, a pioneer and precursor, but not as an influential figure in the normal sense. Although his insight and profundity are not open to doubt, given the present state of research, it is difficult to establish that he gave impetus to eighteenth-century, Western thought.

This situation has led James Edie to suggest:

Vico, it seems true to say, has been less of a vis a tergo, a historical force or cause at the origins of contemporary thought, than a thinker who is confronted ... as a contemporary, as one who faces us from ahead rather than as one who pushes us from behind. 22

Despite Vico's achievements not finding favour until others had produced syntheses of a similar nature, his importance as a thinker is in no way diminished. Croce has presented a valid appraisal of the situation:

Leibniz addressed himself to his own century which rallied round him and gave immediate resonance to his utterance. Vico addressed himself to a coming century and around him

20. I use the term in the sense of Meinecke or Croce.
22. op.cit., p.483.
found silence and the desert. But resonance or silence, the
crowd or the desert, neither add nor detract from the inner
quality of thought. 24

When he did come to the fore Vico was not acclaimed for his services
to empirical research. Indeed, many of his factual statements were
obviously false. It was the suggestiveness and insight which his work
displayed - the new conceptual apparatus, sympathy and breadth of vision
which he brought to the historical data - that marked him as a thinker
worthy of examination:

One must abandon critical judgment of his etymologies and
Roman legal history in a temporary suspension of historical
disbelief to soak in those profound reflections and majestic
affirmations which reverberate long after the mean errors of
detail have been forgotten. 28

Although scholars from different disciplines have come to recognise
the Vichian achievement, prehistorians and anthropologists, as was pointed
out in Chapter I, continue to ignore him. His immediate relevance to
their respective disciplines lies in his concern with primordial man and
his culture. At a time when most "histories" readily invoked the super­
natural, Vico presented an account of the origins of ancient society which,
whether one agrees with it or not, invoked only the natural. To explain
man's condition he had recourse to the natural order, not to the super­
natural. He did not look to the remote past in the manner of the anti­
quarian but as one who was interested in it for the purpose of explaining
the human condition. He did not regard primordial man as a noble savage,

24. 'Vico and the Subsequent Development of Philosophic and Historical
Thought', p.144.
25. See Thomas Berry, The Historical Theory of Giambattista Vico, Washing­
ton, 1949, p.27.
p.150.
29. It may be argued that Vico's recourse to the biblical account indicates
the use of the supernatural. It should be noted that Genesis played a
very subsidiary rôlé in his account as a whole, being used to solve a
problem to which modern man has failed to find an answer. Genesis or
an infinite regress? Which is the more satisfactory?
nor did he consider him sub-human. Early man was simply the embodiment of humanity at a certain stage of its development. The presuppositions from which Vico began his investigations are essentially those of contemporary prehistorians and anthropologists.

When Vico wrote, the disciplines of prehistory and anthropology had not emerged as independent areas of study. He was interested in the remote human past and through his efforts to cast light on it, he enunciated for the first time a number of concepts and principles that are still fundamental to anthropology, history and prehistory. It is not his detailed conclusions but his heuristic devices which make him relevant to all who are preoccupied with remote antiquity:

It is not the detail that gives its value to Vico's picture of the heroic age. His etymologies, his mythical interpretations, the genesis and chronological succession of his gods, the genesis and succession of his phonetic, metrical and stylistic forms - each, taken by itself, may be contested; but taken as a whole they are rich with a truth which transcends the single propositions. 32

It is in this area, the sphere of concepts and models, that contemporary anthropologists and prehistorians have become vitally interested.

In 1970 Marvin Harris wrote:

My main reason for writing this book is to reassert the methodological priority of the search for the laws of history in the science of man ... a general theory of history is required if the expansion of disposable research funds is to result in something other than the rapid growth in the amount of trivia being published in the learned journals. 33

J. G. D. Clark expressed similar thoughts in 1972:

... the progress of prehistoric archaeology as a discipline depends fundamentally on improvements in the quality of the concepts and theories which guide research and mold its interpretations. 34

30. The 'noble savage' was Rousseau's creation whereas the latter view was prevalent amongst the Puritans. See Ray Harvey Pearce, 'The "Ruines of Mankind": the Indian and the Puritan Mind', Journal of the History of Ideas, 13, 1952, pp.200-217.
31. See Appendix B.
The situation that confronted Vico was somewhat similar. Vast quantities of material relevant to the remote past had been collected but for a number of reasons little sympathy was manifest for the makers of these artefacts. For want of interpretative concepts and models the material remained idle. Vico did not amass more material but attempted to present a number of constructs which would render the antiquarian's material significant in 'human' terms - an ideal which is purportedly the goal of most students of the remote past.

Vico's relevance to anthropology is readily apparent. The avenues he opened up by his speculations on the nature of the primitive mind have become areas of specialist examination as is clearly manifested by the work of Lévy-Bruhl and Lévi-Strauss. Vico's theorising in this area enabled him to appreciate the significance of the myths, customs and beliefs of primitive peoples. The importance of an appreciation of primitive mentality was stressed by Lévy-Bruhl:

> It is useless to try and explain the institutions and customs and beliefs of underdeveloped peoples by starting from the psychological and intellectual analysis of "the human mind" as we know it. No interpretation will be satisfactory unless it has for its starting-point the prelogical and mystic mentality underlying the various forms of activity in primitives.

The analysis of the primitive mind as presented by Vico has, of course, been subject to modification by scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss. In its essentials, however, Vico's analysis remains a viable hypothesis today. If the details of his account had not been questioned and found to be inadequate it would be an unsavoury reflection on the anthropological scholarship of the last two centuries.

Vico's relevance to prehistory is not so readily seen. In Chapter I
it was argued that prehistory is often identified with archaeology. It was there suggested that this procedure was not altogether tenable. Indeed, it would appear that archaeology is but one facet of the process employed by the prehistorian. An artefact of itself is meaningless. It is only when it is interpreted in the light of some conceptual framework that it takes on significance for the prehistorian. It was in this latter sphere that Vico was active and is of relevance.

One Vichian contribution (that is) of extreme relevance to the prehistorian is his vindication of the possibility of historical knowledge. Prior to Vico it had simply been assumed that a knowledge of past events was possible. His verum-factum principle laid the foundations for a rational justification of all historical knowledge whether it pertained to the recent or the remote past.

The notion that most historical knowledge is inferential in form was first appreciated by Vico. His contention that all artefacts, all human facta, were indicative of human behaviour is a crucial postulate for the prehistorian. With this hypothesis he freed historical thought "from its dependence on written authorities". He himself reaped the fruits of this approach. He did not interpret myths and language on their face value but examined them as artefacts. By so doing, the wealth of data, which in the hands of his predecessors had remained meaningless, became extremely informative. Vico was employing a process that lies at the very basis of the discipline of prehistory.

The inferential nature of historical knowledge necessitates that the historian be active. Vico was aware of this and strongly emphasised the historian's reconstructive or re-creative task. His vindication of

41. See above p. 11.  
42. See Ch. IV.  
44. See Chs. VII, VIII.
historical knowledge implied that the historian could know more "than what old writers have told us" if he was prepared to elaborate interpretative concepts and models. Vico's contention that active reconstruction, rather than passive reception, was the major task of the historian is especially pertinent to the prehistorian. Perhaps the latter, more so than the conventional historian, is aware that he must be actively engaged in the task of reconstruction. His pots and pans are dumb relics; at first glance they tell him nothing of the human past. The information they will eventually furnish will depend on the questions and interpretative apparatus the prehistorian employs. Vico was the first to appreciate and employ this fact.

The developmental model espoused by Vico was a further achievement that is of import for the prehistorian. Not only did it militate against the theories of degeneration prevalent in Vico's own day, it also provided him with a justification for his use of ethnographic parallels. The use of 'living primitives' to suggest possible explanations of archaeological material has, and continues to play a significant rôle in the prehistorian's world. It was Vico who first presented some logical justification for their utilisation.

Isaiah Berlin has argued, and not without good cause, that Vico was the first to conceive of a cultural approach to history. The cultural approach, too, has a number of implications for the prehistorian. The Vichian History was one that concentrated on social and economic movements to the exclusion of individuals and their activities. It is obviously a history that is well suited to the prehistorian. His dumb relics do not reveal the names of chieftains nor the victors of individual battles.

46. See Ch.IV.
47. See Ch.V.
48. 'Giambattista Vico', The Listener, 26 September, 1972, p.392.
When Gordon Childe argued that the prehistorian could present solutions to historical questions because

history has recently become much less political - less a record of intrigues, battles and revolutions - and more cultural, 49

the history to which he was referring was in great part the legacy of Vico.

Vico's cultural history is of further relevance to the prehistorian

for it implied that all aspects of a culture are closely interwoven, in other words, that a culture is a functioning, living whole. The notion, stemming from this approach, that an artefact is culturally contaminated enables the historian or prehistorian to say, for example, that some object is typically Bronze Age or typically fourteenth century. In the absence of a radiocarbon date the notion of culture can, therefore, provide the prehistorian with some idea of the date of an object. Indeed, until the 1950's, typology was the most significant tool that the prehistorian had at his disposal for dating his material.

Vico's appreciation of the dynamic nature of the human mind, it would seem, raises a question that all prehistorians whose major concern is Lower-Palaeolithic man must face. The prehistorian's ability to interpret artefacts presupposes that their makers were in some sense like himself. In other words, the reconstruction of the human past necessitates a certain constancy in human nature. If the human psyche has evolved as Vico has suggested, has man changed to such an extent that the relationship between his very early and present forms is minimal, perhaps non-existent? It is a problem that looms large for all scholars preoccupied with the Lower Palaeolithic.

Perhaps the most striking of all Vico's contributions to the study of the remote past was the way in which he brought it to life. Prehistorians

50. See Ch.V.
51. See Ch.VI.
are generally fond of proclaiming that their real task concerns people. Gordon Childe, for example, contended that

all archaeological data are expressions of human thoughts and purposes and are valued only as revelations thereof. 52

Geoffrey Bibby asserted that the question, "What did it feel like - to be prehistoric?" is one without which prehistory is meaningless while Stanley Diamond maintained that

the mere cataloguing or even systematic linking of institutions and artifacts is meaningless unless the effort to reproduce the social consciousness, the cultural being of the people who live and produce in their modality, is made. 54

Vico was possessed of similar ideals and demonstrated more than average success in achieving them. Whatever else one may say of his work, one is forced to admit that it manifests an acute sympathy with primitive man and his culture.

It would seem evident, therefore, that Vico elaborated a theoretical position that is pertinently relevant to all who are interested in man and his past. His synthesis has a special import for those prehistorians and anthropologists who are concerned with the presuppositions of their respective disciplines. Although his thought did not bear on archaeological matters as such, the prehistorian is the poorer for neglect of Vico. Despite the fact that the fashionable prehistorian is advised not to look to history for guidelines - Higgs has warned that the tail of history should not wag the prehistoric dog - there is reason to believe that history and prehistory share certain fundamental concepts. An important contribution to theoretical history must therefore have its repercussions in prehistory. E. J. Tapp's retort to Higgs lacks neither charm nor validity:

Far indeed from history wagging the prehistoric dog, as Higgs would have it, is it not fairer to say that the historic nose has led the prehistoric dog? The important point to bear in mind is that it is all one animal bent on a single enterprise, nosing out the human past. 56

Raffaello Franchini has argued that wherever it is realised that historical reconstruction is essentially a task of philosophising, there Vico is alive and well. Hence the increasing sensitivity of prehistorians and anthropologists to the scope, limits and presuppositions - the philosophy - of their respective disciplines renders Vico a most relevant figure to their pursuits. Isaiah Berlin was close to the mark when he stated that those who made the effort to unravel the terrible tangles of his immensely suggestive but often dark ideas would never again be able to return to their beginnings - to the blissful simplicity and symmetry of Descartes or Spinoza, Hume or Russell (or even Kant), still less to that of the Positivist historians and historical theorists; not, at any rate, without an acute and constant sense of the defectiveness of their conceptions of the mind and its powers, and consequently of what men are and how they come to be what they are. 58

58. 'A Note on Vico's Concept of Knowledge', in ibid., p.377.
APPENDIX A

VICO'S STYLISTIC OBSCURITY

Although The New Science has won for Vico, in some select circles, a reputation for genius, it is also generally considered to be a work of the utmost obscurity. The author who writes on Vico and refrains from passing comment on his abstruse style is indeed rare. Caponigri's remark is not an exaggeration:

The Scienza Nuova, by the very vastness and complexity of its structure and by its exuberant detail has won for Vico a reputation for obscurity akin to the reputation of the scholastic doctors for casuistry and subtlety. 1

The charge of obscurity was levelled at Vico's writings in his own day. He records that the Diritto Universale "suffered no other reproof than that of being unintelligible". It is a criticism that has inevitably accompanied the reading of his works. In the nineteenth century, for example, John Fiske, after reading The New Science, commented:

It is the driest, obscurest metaphysicalest book I ever got hold of. Confucius is a more lucid writer. "Mortgages" and "Remainders" are pleasanter to peruse. 3

Modern scholars manifest similar opinions. Vico's method of argument, his inaccuracy and his whole mode of presentation have been severely criticised. Frank Manuel, for example, refers to Vico's "turgid and obscure" style, Raffaello Franchini finds his pages "tortured" while Santillana describes The New Science as "the nightmare of history in night-marish style". Vico's style is obviously not the object of laudatory comment.

2. The Autobiography, p.158.
6. 'Vico and Descartes', Osiris, 9, 1950, p.566.
If his mode of expression has been found wanting, his method of argument is equally deficient. Bertrand Russell, in a typical Anglo-Saxon understatement, asserts that "consistency is not one of Vico's merits". Stuart Hampshire is a little more direct:

Although a philosopher, he has himself the qualities of the primitive which he so admired - flashes of insight alternating with wild absurdities, great imagination without any powers of criticism, and an outrageous indifference to evidence and literal statement of fact.

His complete lack of concern for accuracy of detail is a further factor that renders the work deficient. His handling of his sources is notorious:

Vico, as is well known, had an almost infinite capacity for misquotation.

So obvious is this inadvertence to factual detail that Vichian scholars have come to view it as a defining characteristic of Vichian procedure. Vico is not celebrated for his scholarly and accurate footnotes; it is his insight, his power as a thinker, on which his immortality rests:

Depth and acuteness do not always flourish equally side by side: and Vico, however much he fell short in acuteness, was always profoundly deep.

Perhaps the factor that contributes most to the obscurity of The New Science is its overall structure. Vico has tried to solve too many problems and present his solutions in too great detail. The result is that the reader loses sight of the overall argument; the wood cannot be seen for the trees:

He lingered so long over the details that, when the end was

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8. 'Vico and his New Science', The Listener, 7 April, 1949, p.570.
reached, he had not succeeded in laying out the argument which they should have illustrated, as a consecutive and intelligible whole. 12

The end product of these deficiencies was to occasion a work that is an absolute jungle. Indeed, the obscurity of Vico's writings is so marked that it has provoked some scholars to elaborate theories to explain it. One such theory is that Vico deliberately wrote in a confused fashion so that his work would be ambiguous. Vico's prime concern in The New Science was the origins of humanity. When dealing with this topic one had to exercise extreme care. A number of scholars, including some of Vico's acquaintances, had aroused the ire of the Inquisition for statements they had made concerning the beginnings of history. It has been suggested therefore that Vico's obscurity is the result of an attempt to confuse the Inquisition or foreign despots:

In his intellectual loneliness and under the pressure of ecclesiastical censorship, which in his last years had grown very severe, Vico's style became always more synthetic and cryptic and consequently more obscure. 15

It is argued then, that Vico shrouded any possible unorthodoxy with the cloak of obscurity. In support of this view, scholars point to Vico's distinction between sacred and profane history. He emphasised that he was only concerned with Gentile history so as to avoid dangerous ground.

Prima facie, such a theory merits consideration for the Inquisition was active during Vico's life time. Indeed, Naples boasted three forms of the Inquisition: the Spanish, the Roman and that of the local

13. See loc.cit.
15. A. Grimaldi, The Universal Humanity of Giambattista Vico, New York, 1958, p.90. See also ibid., p.146.
The Inquisition had first become uneasy about Naples in 1671, as a result of the growing influence of Descartes. In 1686 it moved against the "atheists" and in the early 1690's a number of authors were condemned and imprisoned. In 1693 the archbishop of Naples read out their errors among which were the beliefs that men existed before Adam and the souls of men were not essentially different from those of beasts. In addition, the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius was condemned. At the turn of the century, then, those writing on the origins of man were under close scrutiny by a hostile authority. It was not until 1746, two years after Vico's death, that the Inquisition in its most hated form, the Roman, was finally dislodged from Naples. There is, therefore, some support for Fisch's contention:

Vico says nothing of the Inquisition in his autobiography, but his writings are not fully intelligible to one who does not bear in mind that it was active in Naples throughout his lifetime.

Although Fisch may be correct in this proposal, it does not follow that the basic cause of obscurity in *The New Science* was fear of the Inquisition; fear of the Inquisition is not a necessary result of the fact of the Inquisition. It may also be urged that to write in an obscure fashion on such a dangerous topic was quite dangerous. Obscurity in such a matter is two edged; it may serve to cloak unorthodoxy but on the other hand it leaves the work open to any interpretation and so possibly to an unorthodox one. The employment of the distinction between profane and sacred history also gives little support to those who would suggest Vico set out to confuse the authorities. It may have been a cautionary

20. See *ibid.*, pp.49-51.
measure, but, if it was, it was also a traditional Renaissance distinction.

There are also certain factors which suggest that Vico had no reason
to practise deceit. In his writings he declares himself very much a
Catholic and accepts the church's teaching on Adam. His *Scienza Nuova*
he considered was "to the glory of the Catholic religion". Not only
did he declare the orthodoxy of his work and himself a loyal Catholic, he
was also wary of giving scandal. It was for this reason that he gave up
his annotations of Grotius:

Vico had covered the first book and half of the second when he
abandoned the task, reflecting that it was not fitting for a
man of Catholic faith to adorn with notes the work of a
heretical author. 28

Unless one supposes, then that Vico was a sublime hypocrite, there is every
reason for believing that he was a sincere Catholic. Indeed, it has been
suggested that it was Vico's Catholicism which prevented his taking some
of his theories to their logical conclusion; Croce suggested the philosopher
in Vico always yielded to the Catholic. There seems little doubt then,
that Vico was a staunch Catholic. If one adds to this fact that he did
not consider his writings in any way unorthodox it becomes difficult to
accept the view that he deliberately wrote in an obscure fashion for the
purposes of deception.

The essential rôle played by sacred history in his general theory of
gentile history suggests that his distinction was not merely a cautionary
measure. A knowledge of sacred history was essential if one were to
capture the beginnings of profane history; it is by sacred history that
Vico explains the existence of the rude creatures who began to create

26. See ibid., II, p.22.
28. ibid., p.155.
29. op.cit., p.143.
gentile history. Hence there is no suggestion that his theory of gentile history conflicts in any way with the tenets of Biblical history.

In the light of this evidence, the theory which suggests that the obscurity of The New Science is deliberate, a cloak for unorthodoxy, seems a somewhat unsatisfactory, if not a completely mistaken, explanation. Indeed, it would appear that the abstruse nature of the work is to be explained more satisfactorily by invoking other hypotheses.

Vico himself was aware of the deficiencies of expression and accuracy in his masterpiece. He attributed them to his failure to exercise due diligence with the work. Owing to publication requirements the work had been written in a very short time; indeed it had been written in an "almost fatal fury". At this time Vico was also suffering with a long and serious illness. Since diligence was a "tardy virtue" he was therefore unable to practice it. Diligence required time, time that Vico did not have at his disposal. Hence the deficiencies of The New Science:

For all these reasons he was unable to attend to certain expressions which were confused and ought to have been set in order, or were left in the rough and ought to have been polished, or were too short and ought to have been expanded; nor to a multitude of passages in verse rhythms, which ought to be avoided in prose; nor finally to several slips of memory, which however were verbal only and did no harm to the sense. 34

Although his haste and illness may explain some of the obscurity and inaccuracy, their fundamental source is the personality of Vico himself. Many of the inaccuracies arose because he was simply not concerned with detail:

Vico, the genius, often erred in his facts, interested as he was only in the vast design which regulated men's destinies. 35

31. It was begun on Christmas Day, 1729 and completed on Easter Sunday, 1730.
33. ibid., p.195.
34. loc.cit.
His was a wide canvas and on more than one occasion he deprecated exact scholarship. His aim was to present a broad outline; the details could be fitted in by lesser minds. He records that when he began to study geometry he learned to his cost that

... that study proper to minute wits is not easy for minds already made universal by metaphysics. So he gave up this study as one which chained and confined his mind, now accustomed through long study of metaphysics to move freely in the infinite of genera....

He evinced then, no affection for detail. Although he was a penetrating and original thinker, he was no meticulous scholar.

A student of Alphonso Grimaldi's once remarked that "reading The New Science is like opening a hundred windows on a lustily blowing gale". The simile is strikingly apt for it expresses Vico's temperament and cast of mind. He was possessed of a turbulent, excitable and undisciplined intellect:

There is no suggestion of classical restraint about him; fiery, intense, to an almost insane degree, he is the very personification of the Soul Unsatisfied.

Indeed, Vico admitted that he was "choleric to a fault".

Consequently, when he realised that he had made a number of important discoveries, in his excitement he tried to present them all at once. In his exuberant haste his revolutionary ideas were expressed in fragmentary form. They therefore engendered confusion and Vico's masterpiece was rendered wellnigh unintelligible.

Passion, with him, tries desperately hard to lend wings to sentences too heavily laden with thought to take to the air with ease, and Vico, eager to prove all things at once, in constant apprehension lest he has insufficiently explained himself, always in a hurry, puffing and panting and floundering along, presents his public with his magnum opus, and his magnum opus falls completely flat.

42. Paul Hazard, op.cit., p.414.
He conceived the ideas but lacked the necessary temperament and skills to enunciate them clearly.

This inadequacy in Vico's armoury has been traced back to his formative years. His schooling had been irregular and this had produced an undisciplined mind. It is in this context that Flint has conjectured that

Strict and judicious educational discipline might have done our philosopher much good. He never acquired the power of keeping his imagination in due restraint; of distinguishing clearly between the possible, probable, and certain; of knowing when a proposition was sufficiently proved, and when not; of ordering his thoughts and arranging his proofs in a distinct and appropriate manner. 44

Vico, then, did not possess the necessary skills to formulate his ideas in logical order. His natural exuberance held sway and so all his ideas strove for simultaneous expression. The result was a muddle. As Isaiah Berlin has so aptly remarked:

Vico had not ... enough talent for his genius. 45

An additional factor contributing to inaccuracy was the conditions under which he worked. He recounts that it was his custom, when reading, writing or thinking, to do so

... in the midst of the turmoil and distraction of the household and often in conversation with his friends. 47

Such a practice would certainly not lend itself to the production of clear and accurate composition.

Perhaps the hypothesis that most adequately accounts for the notorious Vichian obscurity is the suggestion that the work is to a large extent a reflection of the general confusion of thought during the period in question. The Medieval synthesis had disintegrated and nothing had

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43. See Ch.III.
44. Vico, Edinburgh, 1884, p.41.
45. 'A Note on Vico's Concept of Knowledge', in Giorgio Tagliacozzo, op.cit., p.373.
46. The Autobiography, p.163.
47. ibid., p.154.
as yet been erected to take its place. It was therefore a period of general uncertainty and scepticism:

No principle of intellectual order had yet been found for the post-Renaissance world. The main characteristic of the intellectual tendencies following the breakdown of this synthesis was the scepticism which gradually drifted into European thought. 49

It was to combat this tendency that Vico set himself the task of creating a new synthesis of human knowledge. To do this he had to elaborate new concepts. The New Science was a pioneer work and as such it contained concepts which had not been fully worked out. They were therefore difficult to define in clear and accurate fashion. Vico applied himself to his task for some twenty years but the product of his efforts was only a fragmentary formulation. The most probable source of confusion in The New Science then, was the confusion of Vico's own thought:

From what he has said in his own writings, from the writings themselves, and from the difficulties that his own and later times have had in understanding them, it is beyond doubt that this obscurity derived ultimately from a lack of clarity in his own mind in relation to the subject on which he was writing. 50

48. Descartes had offered a solution but only at the price of denigrating every form of knowledge that could not be reduced to a mathematical format.
49. Thomas Berry, op.cit., p.17.
50. ibid., p.11.
APPENDIX B

VICO'S SOURCE MATERIAL

His Neglect of Physical Remains

The major sources Vico employed for his investigation of remote antiquity were the works of the classical authors. The great majority of his inspired conjectures were a product of his immersion in the Homeric writings. When he attempted to present some confirmation of these hypotheses he used ethnographic material the over-riding source of which was the Germania of Tacitus.

When it is appreciated that Vico wrote in the earlier part of the eighteenth century, this method of procedure may appear somewhat surprising. The seventeenth century had not only witnessed a great upsurge of interest in material remains; it had also seen the publication of numerous works presenting detailed descriptions of primitive peoples. Vico almost entirely ignored the former and made scant use of the latter. Thus he failed to make use of a vast store of information that was quite relevant to his pursuits.

In Italy, as in Britain, the seventeenth century evidenced a great enthusiasm for, and preoccupation with, antiquities of a material nature. This trend had began during the Renaissance when scholars became interested in the material remains of the early Christian and Classical world. The inadequacy of historical methods, highlighted by the rise of the natural sciences, accelerated this trend, for scholars came to appreciate more fully the value of physical remains in verifying the accuracy of historical accounts. Consequently, by the end of the seventeenth century, works such as Francesco Bianchini's La I storia Universala provata con monumenti.

2. See Ch.II.
e figurata con simboli degli antichi began to appear. The significance of this work lay in its underlying assumption that archaeological evidence (storia per simboli) provided a firmer basis for history than did literary evidence. It assumed that coins, inscriptions, charters, statues and buildings were more reliable than 'historical' sources.

It seems impossible that Vico could have been unaware of this new trend. Italy was a land rich in relics from the ancient past. Joseph Addison who visited the country in 1700 recorded that it abounds with cabinets of curiosities and vast collections of all kinds of antiquities. Although he observed that, relative to the rest of Italy, Naples was somewhat less rich in material remains, he stated that "at about eight miles distance from Naples lies a very noble scene of antiquities".

The Neapolitan public were not unaware of their historic relics and monuments for they bitterly resented their abduction by the Spanish governors. It is therefore very likely that Vico was conscious of their existence. His awareness of this enthusiasm for material remains seems to be positively indicated by his praise of Mabillon and his acquaintance with Dominic d'Aulusio. Pietro Giannone has recorded that d'Aulusio, a man whom Vico respected and admired, was a "great Antiquary". Hence it seems untenable to argue that Vico ignored the antiquarian approach because he was unaware of its existence.

If Vico was aware of the antiquarian movement, and it seems quite probable that he was, why did he ignore it? At first glance it would

3. A similar phenomenon was occurring in England at this time. See Ch.I.  
6. Ibid., p.431.  
8. See The New Science, 485. Mabillon was an enthusiastic antiquary.  
10. op.cit., p.841.
appear that, given Vico's interest in ancient man, the antiquarian approach would have been a fruitful means of procedure. There are several factors which may help explain Vico's neglect of the new method.

One may begin by asking how widely used was the new method? Granted the immense interest in antiquities and isolated instances of scholars employing them for the purposes of historical argument, there seems to be little evidence to indicate that the use of relics for historical purposes was a well established procedure. Excavations had been carried out at Herculaneum in 1711 but were suspended by order of the government. Although work began again in 1736 it was too late to influence Vico in any way. This was also true of the work of two of the more celebrated antiquarians of the eighteenth century, J. J. Winckelmann and William Stukeley. The former's first publication, On the Discoveries at Herculaneum did not appear until 1762, some twenty years after Vico's death. The first of William Stukeley's works began to appear during the closing stages of Vico's life and so it is probable that he was unaware of their existence. It is possible, therefore, that Vico made little use of the physical remains available because he was not aware of any precedent for their successful utilization.

A further factor which must be considered is the availability of antiquities to scholars in the early eighteenth century. At this time an atmosphere of secrecy often surrounded excavations, rulers considering archaeological recoveries their exclusive personal property. The artefacts recovered at Herculaneum, for example, were "most jealously guarded at the royal palace". The problems encountered by Winckelmann (he was treated as a spy)

constitute an excellent example of the difficulties scholars experienced in gaining access to archaeological material. Hence, although a certain amount of artefactual material had been recovered, there is reason to believe that it was not readily available. This may help explain Vico's neglect of a source that was apparently at his disposal.

The nature of the artefactual material must also be taken into account if Vico's apparently crass neglect is to be explained. The antiquarians who were active in Vico's environment (Italy) were mainly concerned with the physical remains of the early Christian and Classical periods. This was also true of many French and British scholars who manifested a peculiar interest in the ancient civilisations of the Eastern Mediterranean. Since Vico's preoccupation was the origin of these societies, what had preceded them, he may well have considered that the antiquities available were of little use to him.

There is also the possibility that Vico considered the antiquarians "grubbing compilers", scholars who concentrated on trivia, amassed vast collections of objects but manifested little or no understanding of the people who made them. It is this view of the antiquarian that Croce depicts:

It is on the other hand only proper to observe the failings of the first seriously scientific efforts of philologists and antiquaries. They rehabilitated witnesses, laid bare falsifications, reconstructed lists of rulers and magistrates, connected chronology and contradicted certain legends: but, whether owing to the tendencies of thought usual among pure scholars and philologists or because of the general atmosphere of their century's culture, they neither had nor conveyed a feeling for the antique and the primitive.

17. Italy possessed literary records which extended back to the most glorious and distinguished period of her past. The 'prehistoric age' was long departed. It is not surprising therefore that her scholars showed little interest in the preclassical era. In countries such as Denmark and to a lesser extent England, the non literate past was not so far removed. Hence it was to be expected that prehistoric archaeology should manifest its first significant development in the northern countries of Europe.
18. This is not to deny that Britain had her Ethwyd, Howlands and Stukeley.
If Croce's comment is valid, and there is reason to think that it is, the antiquarian would have held little attraction for Vico. Indeed, he would seem to have been diametrically opposed to such approaches. Vico was concerned with the broad, the general, the sweeping and above all he expressed a great empathy with primordial man — Vico's interest was men, not objects.

Perhaps the most important single factor which may explain Vico's neglect of physical remains is the question he was attempting to answer. It is generally agreed that the type of question asked will, to a great extent, determine the type of answer received. Vico was endeavouring to solve problems defined by scholars such as Thomas Hobbes, Jean Bodin and Francis Bacon. Although they were questions about ancient or 'primitive' man, they were not archaeological questions as such. Hence it is not to be expected that Vico would employ archaeological methods.

In view of the preceding discussion, Vico's failure to utilize artefactual material can be understood, if not excused. There is the added possibility that many of the problems with which he grappled are not susceptible to an archaeological solution.

His Neglect of Ethnographic Material

A second source of relevant information of which Vico made scant use was the vast store of ethnographic material which had poured in from the New World. The voyages of discovery presented Europeans with far broader horizons so that in Vico's day they were reasonably familiar with the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the Far East and Africa. Since the first voyage of Columbus Europeans demonstrated a keen interest in the new and bizarre peoples. By the early eighteenth century one did not have to rely

22. See Ch.II.
23. See Appendix A.
24. See Ch.IX.
for one's knowledge of far away peoples on the phantasies recorded in works such as that of John Mandeville. The indigenous peoples were themselves displayed across Europe and by 1600 A.D. the second edition of Hakluyt's extensively read work, The Principle Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation, a collection of documents extending to one and a half million words, had appeared. In 1612 William Strackey's The Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania was published while in 1673 Ogilby's Embassies to China underwent a second edition. Both these latter works presented rich and detailed descriptions of the customs, economies and technologies of indigenous peoples.

Given Vico's admiration of the English (in the person of Francis Bacon) and the publication on the Continent of works such as Pere Lafitau's Moeurs des sauvages Ameriquains (1724) it would appear that a substantial amount of ethnographic material was available to him. Except for a few token references, however, he ignored it. How is this to be explained?

It was not that Vico did not appreciate the value of ethnographic data. Indeed, he supplied a theoretical foundation for its use, ethnographic parallels playing a major role in his attempts to confirm his hypotheses. The main source of his information, however, was the Germania of Tacitus and other ancient works, his references to the ancient Germans being far more numerous than those to other ancient peoples.

There are a number of factors which may help to explain this seeming imbalance. Vico was a classical humanist. During his sojourn at Vatolla

28. See Margaret Hodgen, op.cit., p.111.
32. See Ch.V.
33. In support of his hypotheses Vico cites the ancient Germans on 26 occasions, the American Indians on 12 occasions, the Patagonians on 5 occasions, the Chinese on 12 occasions, the peoples of the Indies on 7 occasions and the Africans on 2 occasions.
34. See Ch.III.
he had immersed himself in the classical literature. Hence the authors of this period were the ones with whom he was most familiar. Since they purportedly described the origin of the classical societies of the ancient Mediterranean and the less developed peoples who dwelt on their borders, they appeared to be suitable for his purposes and so, being familiar with them, it was natural that he should concentrate on them.

An additional explanation of Vico's neglect of the new ethnographic data is that, possibly, he was unaware that it was available. Despite his admiration of the English he did not read the language and constantly refused to learn French. His access to the new material was also hampered by his geographical location. Naples was at this time a backwater of Europe. She no longer evidenced a thriving intellectual or trading community; the hegemony in these fields had passed to the northern and western countries of Europe. It is therefore possible that it took some considerable time for new information to filter down to Naples.

This situation was rendered more acute by the extremely isolated personal life that Vico endured. His desk was his citadel and on one occasion important letters failed to reach him for several months simply because he was not in the habit of frequenting the Post Office. Hence there is good evidence for proposing that Vico's failure to make greater use of the data pouring into Europe from travellers' accounts of the Americas can be explained by his academic and geographical isolation.

In his defence, it may be argued that for Vico's purposes, Tacitus was a more valid source of ethnographic material than the 'travel literature'. One of the many criticisms brought against the use of ethnographic parallels by contemporary archaeologists is that it is invalid to argue from one society to another if they are widely separated in space and time. Hence

35. Vico was able to familiarise himself with the theories of Hobbes, Bacon and Descartes because they wrote in Latin.
36. See Ch.III.
37. See Ch.III.
it could be argued that Tacitus was more appropriate for Vico's task. The peoples he described were much more closely linked, both geographically and temporally, to the peoples in whom Vico was interested.
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