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Vico's Road to Postmodernism

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Submitted with a view to obtain the degree of M. Litt.

Faculty of Philosophy

NUI Maynooth

January 2006
Author's Declaration:

I hereby declare that this project represents my own work and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, by me or by another person, for the purpose of obtaining any credit/grade. I agree that this project may be made available to future students of the college.

Michael W. Anthony (Tony) Fahey
I owe a special debt of gratitude to my supervisor Dr Thomas Kelly for welcoming the proposal for this thesis, and for his direction, encouragement and understanding during the course of its writing. Thanks are also due to my other supervisor, Dr Mette Lebech, for her very fine criticisms and observations; to fellow Joycean acolyte Anne Markey, for first drawing my attention to Vico and his works; to Dr John Flood, for his interest in this project, and to Dr Patrick Quinn, for providing some valuable advice at a time when it was most needed. I am also indebted to Dr Ron Callan and Breda Carson Callan, and to Dr Antonio Camagna and Anna Camagna: Ron, for the many hours shared, over many years, agonising over philosophical issues; and Breda, for possessing an infectious joie de vivre that served as the perfect antidote to research fatigue; Antonio and Anna, for fostering in me a love of Italy and its language. Finally, to Ann Shaw Fahey and to Grace Fahey, I owe the deepest gratitude, not only for their prowess as proof-readers, but also for their unfailing trust, support, and love.
Abstract

Postmodernism is a post Second World War movement that is the natural issue of its progenitor, modernism. That is, where early twentieth century and post First World War ‘modern’ intellectuals held that it was their privilege and duty to restore order to a fragmented and chaotic world, post Second World war thinkers hold that since world order is an unachievable and therefore fruitless ambition, all humankind can do is make the best of what they have. One could say that where modernists attempted to put the shattered shell of Humpty Dumpty back together again following his tumble from the wall, postmodernists feel that all one can do is do what one can with the pieces. Postmodernism is also associated with a movement that arose when writers and thinkers, in the wake of Saussure’s revelation that the words we attach to things are purely arbitrary, turned their iconoclastic gaze on universal concepts or ‘grand narratives’. This thesis sets out to show that postmodern consciousness is not a recent phenomenon, but, as a critique of the fragility of the claims made by exponents of the notion of metanarratives or ‘universal concepts’, it is evident in the philosophy of the eighteenth century Italian philosopher, Giambattista Vico. The title of this thesis, ‘Vico’s Road to Postmodernism’, is something of a play on words of the theme that James Joyce, who, as will be shown, Ihab Hassan identifies as a postmodern thinker, took for his book *Finnegans Wake*. It seems that Joyce, who declared that his imagination soared whenever he read Vico, as a tribute to the Italian philosopher, begins the narrative of his famous novel at the Vico Road in the
South Dublin suburb of Killiney. Not only is there a link between the name of this road and Giambattista Vico, but the view of Dublin Bay from this road is said to replicate the view of the bay of Naples, Vico’s native city.
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Introduction

Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), the sixth of eight children born to Antonio di Vico and his wife Candida Masullo of Naples, was born in a room over his father's bookshop at 31 Via San Biagio dei Librai, Naples, Italy, on June 23, 1668. Son of a poor bookseller, he was raised in an atmosphere of abject poverty. The Vico family home consisted of a single downstairs room, used simultaneously as a bookshop, a living room, a kitchen, and a loft or garret which acted as a bedroom and accessed by ladder. When Vico was seven years of age he fell from the ladder and received a near fatal blow to the head – he remained unconscious for about five hours. So severe was the injury that the prognosis of the doctor who attended the young Italian was that if he should live it was highly probable that he would be permanently brain-damaged. While, as is evident, Vico's injury healed, in his autobiography he attributes his melancholy and irritable temperament to this 'mischance'. However, it seems that he considered it a small price to pay for characteristics which are also attributes of 'men of ingenuity and depth' ('uomini ingegnosi e profundi'). Although he attended several schools, including a Jesuit college, Vico considered himself to be self-taught – a claim which has some legitimacy since he spent much of the period following his injury reading the works of Plato, Tacticus, Bacon and Grotius. His erratic early education also included grammar and the Latin classics.

In 1684 Vico began to study for a practising career in law but he abandoned this in 1686 when he accepted a tutoring position in the home of Duca della Rocca at Vatolla, south of Salerno. Whilst there he became secretly infatuated with his own student, Giulia della Rocca. However, the amorous young tutor was to learn that there are certain social barriers to which intelligence and learning are not enough to provide a key, when Giulia, notwithstanding her fondness for Vico, married someone from her own social class, only to die soon afterwards at the age of twenty-two. In 1695, Vico returned to Naples, licked his emotional wounds and, in December 1699, married a poorly educated Neapolitan young woman called Teresa Destito. Although she and Vico produced eight children, the, albeit well intentioned but the semi-literate Teresa, was a poor companion for her more erudite and stern spouse. In the same year (1699) Vico was named professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples. His ambition to hold the principal chair of jurisprudence was never realised, and, up until five years his death in 1744, he was obliged to supplement his modest earnings in the lesser post by writing ‘Latin inscriptions, official eulogies, and laudatory biographies of important persons’.  

In his autobiography, Vico presents his absence from his native city from 1686 to 1695 as a period of isolation from the lively intellectual life of Naples. In fact quite the opposite is the case for, while tutor to the children of the Duca della Rocca, he remained in contact with Neapolitan intellectual events through membership of certain private societies and salons which had arisen to counteract the conservative influence of the Church and university. Through an intensive,

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self-directed course of study in the excellent library at Vatolla, he became acquainted with the Neoplatonists, the classical atomists such as Democritus and Lucretius, physicists such as Galileo and Gassendi, English thinkers such as Francis Bacon, Hobbes, Locke and Boyle and the rationalists, Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza and Leibniz. By the end of this period he had acquired an encyclopaedic, if idiosyncratic, understanding of the worlds of ancient and modern learning. While the activities of the Inquisition made it difficult for him to be open about his true philosophical leanings, the fact that many of his friends were suspected of being atheists, together with the poem, ‘Affetti di un disperato’, that he penned in 1692 in homage to the disciple of Epicurus Lucretius (c. 95-c. 54BC), support the view that Vico entertained heretical views that would remain with him for the rest of his life.

In 1722 Vico, in anticipation of gaining the as yet unfilled chair of law that had remained vacant since 1717, had printed a publication entitled: Notes by Giambattista Vico on two books, one On the Principle of Universal Law, the other On The Consistency of Jurisprudence. His hopes of gaining the chair were heightened by his belief that ‘the life he had led in his native city, where by the work of his intellect he had honoured all, been of service to many, and harmed none’, 4 (‘[la] vita che aveva menato nella sua patria dove con le sue opere d’ingegno avevo onorato tutti, giovato a molti e nociuto a nessuno’), 5 together with, what he perceived as, the success of his performance during the lecture he had delivered for the concourse, or competition, for the chair, would not go unrewarded. However, perhaps in his enthusiasm to ensure his promotion,

Vico decided to print and distribute copies of his lecture, one of which he delivered to Don Domenico Caravita, one of the people responsible for awarding the chair. On Caravita’s advice, Vico was persuaded to withdraw his application on the grounds that he could be charged with attempting to influence the judge’s decision – a charge which Vico held could more appropriately be levelled at the other candidates for the post.6

Following his disappointment over his failure to procure the chair of jurisprudence, Vico turned his attention to the construction of the philosophy for which he is most famous, developing it progressively in the various versions of his New Science. In 1709 his On the Method of the Studies of Our Time (De Nostri Temporis Studiorum Ratione), had been published by Mosca, followed in 1710 by On the Oldest Wisdom of the Italians Recoverable from the Origins of the Latin Language (De Antiquissima Italorum Sapienta ex Lingue Latinae Originibus Eruenda), then, in 1720-2, came On the Single Principle of Universal Law and its Single Purpose (De Universi Juris uno Principio et Fine Uno), culminating in 1725, just three years after the debacle with over the chair, with what Berlin calls ‘his crowning masterpiece’,7 the New Science (Scienza Nuova). Much of our knowledge of his intense intellectual life is derived from the first and second parts of his autobiography, written soon after the production of the first and second editions of the New Science. A third part, going up to his death, was added by the Marquis of Villarosa in 1818. In part three, the Marquis describes how Vico, unable to procure a publisher for his magnum opus, confesses that in order to realise his ambition to see his work in print he

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6 see Vico. 1975. Ibid., pp160-164
was compelled by his poverty to sell his precious diamond ring.\(^8\) Whilst the price received for
the ring covered the cost of printing and binding copies of his book, Vico’s sacrifice proved
fruitless as the *New Science* ‘fell almost dead from the press’.\(^9\)

Amongst the private students that Vico was forced to take on in order to supplement his meagre
salary were the sons many of the finest gentlemen of Naples. Notwithstanding his lowly
academic position, it was believed that Vico would provide them, ‘better than any other
professor’, with ‘...sound instruction along with the best moral training’.\(^10\) While these
measures went some way to help, they were still not enough to furnish him with the means to
live very far above the poverty line. Endowed with a wife who, while of ‘pure and innocent
character’ was sorely lacking in ‘those talents which are required even in a mediocre wife and
mother’, Vico was ‘obliged to plan and provide not only for the clothes but whatever else his
children might need’.\(^11\) Indeed, so diligent was he in his paternal duties that he, perceiving his
eldest daughter, Luisa, to possess talents ‘beyond those necessary in a woman’,\(^12\) instructed her
with such care that ‘on reaching maturity, she distinguished herself in poetry’.\(^13\) Sadly, not all
Vico’s children gave him such satisfaction, for his son, Ignatio, who from childhood had
exhibited slothful ways, became ‘addicted ...to all sorts of vices, so that he became a dishonour

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\(^8\) ibid., p. 2001
\(^11\) ibid., p. 202
\(^12\) ibid.
\(^13\) ibid.
to the whole family'.14 Eventually his behaviour became so unseemly that Vico was forced to
call on the police to have him incarcerated - which they did. Not before Vico, regretting his
action, pleaded with his son to run and save himself. Vico's attempts to create a sense of
domestic harmony under difficult circumstances was further compounded by the added cost of
medical expense incurred as a result of the chronic bad health of his other daughter, Angela
Teresa. Notwithstanding these grave preoccupations, Vico, Villarosa explains, never diverted
'from regular attendance at classes',15 and 'endured everything with heroic patience',16 only
occasionally sharing his troubles with an intimate friend.

In time, however, Vico's nervous system was unable to sustain the continual strain under which
he was forced to operate and he began to suffer from lapse of memory. Gradually his condition
became so bad that he was forced to give up private lessons and to surrender his position at the
university - not before, however, arranging for his son Gennaro to succeed him. Soon he
became a virtual recluse. His memory 'was so far gone that he forgot the nearest objects and the
most familiar things'17 and despite the best efforts of his medical colleagues to find a remedy for
his illness his condition became so acute that he failed even to recognise his own children. On
January 22nd, 1744, just three years after he retired from teaching and shortly before the third and
final edition of his New Science was published, Giambattista Vico died.

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14 ibid., p. 203
15 ibid.
16 ibid.
Although initially drawn to Descartes, Vico’s autodidacticism and eclectic taste in philosophy and philology meant that he would never quite catch the fever of Cartesianism that dominated his time. In virtue of his own struggle to understand the history of the origin of ideas, he came to believe that the self does not exist in a solipsist vacuum, attached to the body by the pineal gland – or not attached at all. Nor does this separated thinking self have access to ideas that are not sense dependent. Rather it is that all ideas derive spontaneously from the collective mind of the community as it attempts to describe, explain, and order the world in which the community lives. For Vico, the ideas and concepts upon which humans rely to regulate their lives do not derive from any transcendental realm, as many of his modern contemporaries believed, but from the sensus communis – by which he means the communal imagination - of the people themselves. This impulse to establish order on a chaotic world first arose when the first men, more beast than human, came to imagine that the roar of thunder was the voice of an unseen anthropomorphic god who could be both wrathful and benevolent. Whilst the fact that they remained relatively safe for long periods suggested that this god was, in the main, benevolent, the sound of thunder and the flash of lightning were interpreted by these early men as signs that the same god, angered by their abandoned behaviour, wished them put in place institutions that would regulate their lawless and disordered lives. Unlike his modern contemporaries who held that there were certain universal rules that remain unchanged across all time, for Vico, rules are not written in stone, but, as human consciousness evolves, change as needs demand. As Sandra Rudnick Luft explains, Vico’s ‘sense of a world without order, or one whose order is inaccessible – forces him to raise the question of the origins of human existence more radically than had his onto-
theological tradition'. Moreover, she continues, quoting from the *New Science* (para, 147), Vico comes to realise that 'the nature of institutions is nothing but their coming into being... at certain times and in certain guises'. For Vico, since these institutions are created by human imagination, their constitutions, can be revisited, re-evaluated, deconstructed, and reconstructed to meet the challenges of changing times.

Because of the dominance of Cartesianism, Vico's anti-rationalist philosophy was virtually ignored in his own time, and it was not until the nineteenth century that his thought began to make an impact on other thinkers and writers. Whilst it is impossible to say precisely who or how many were directly influenced by Vico, just some of those who can positively be identified as having engaged with, been exposed to, or benefited from Vico's philosophy are Karl Marx, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Jules Michelet, Auguste Comte, Benedetto Croce, R.G. Collingwood, William Butler Yeats, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Edward Said, Hannah Arendt, and F. M. Dostoevski. Although Vico's anti-modern position is well documented by Mark Lilla, in his *G. B. Vico. The Making of an Anti-Modern* (1993), and Isaiah Berlin, in his *Three Critics of the Enlightenment, Vico, Hamann, Herder* (2000), it is recently being acknowledged that the many arguments contained in *New Science* anticipate much of what is being said by exponents of postmodernism. For example, Timothy Costelloe, in his article on Vico in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2003), remarks that, amongst others, Vico's philosophy has been

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19 ibid.
compared to that of Jean François Lyotard, and Sandra Rudnick Luft, in her book *Vico’s Uncanny Humanism: Reading the ‘New Science’ between Modern and Postmodern* (2003), insists that it is a mistake to question as anachronistic Vico’s affinity to postmodernism, and argues that extensive comparisons can be made between Vico, Nietzsche, and Derrida That being said, whilst Luft admits that she ‘hear[s] in *New Science* ['intimations’]... of postmodern writers that come after it’, she sees Vico less as a precursor of postmodernism and more as a bridge between modernism and postmodernism. However, when the features generally identified with postmodernism are measured against those contained in the *New Science*, it becomes clear that Vico’s *magnum opus* moves too far beyond the way set by his modern contemporaries to be seen merely as a link to the two philosophical genres. For example, a central feature of postmodernism is a collapse of confidence in the universal principles of the Enlightenment. Historically, it can also mean any work after the modernist period. Since modern philosophy is deemed to have its foundations in Cartesianism, postmodernism is a rejection of the major features of Cartesian ‘modern’ thought. Where modernism embraced peripheral texts that were heretofore excluded from the literary and philosophical cannon, postmodernism does away with canonical boundaries altogether, drawing material from wherever it deems appropriate to the issue under discussion. Postmodernism holds that human consciousness does not contain *a priori* ideas or concepts, and that there is no transcendental truth that can be known. This thesis sets out to show that Giambattista Vico’s *New Science* meets all of these criteria for postmodernism.

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Amongst the characteristics defined as peculiarly postmodernist is the view that individual consciousness is not privileged to sit as some unfeeling homunculus detached from worldly affairs, but is shaped by outside forces and influences. Another characteristic of postmodernism is the flagrant or unapologetic plundering of other materials for the construction of one’s own work – otherwise known as ‘intertextuality’. The postmodernist writer not only uses other narratives as a source of inspiration, but often to critique the very narratives from whence this inspiration came. Our opening chapter, ‘Vico’s Sources’ sets out to show that whilst Vico’s work may be justifiably acknowledged as a philosophical tour de force, it is the case that the foundations upon which his philosophy is built did arise from divine inspiration, rather it was constructed from the ideas and influences of his own social environment. Vico’s New Science centres on three main themes: (i) that the history of humankind is a cyclical process, (ii) that ideas arise from the common sense judgements of the community – the sensus communis, and (iii) that man can only know that which he himself makes – verum ipsum factum. In order to show that these ideas were in circulation long before Vico collated them into a unified system, these themes are discussed under separate sub-headings. In short, this chapter will show that as early as the eighteenth century Giambattista Vico’s New Science was demonstrating the postmodern view that the unapologetic borrowing of the material of other thinkers for the construction of one’s own narrative was not only permissible but actively encouraged. Continuing on this theme, the second chapter, ‘From Heresy to Postmodernism’, discusses the historico-cultural influences to which the Vico was exposed during his lifetime. It will open with the view that the features associated with the term ‘heresy’ in Vico’s time compare more than

22 ibid., p. xv
favourably with those associated with the term ‘postmodernism’ today. With this comparison in mind, this chapter also discusses the fact that, whilst on first reading Vico’s *New Science* appears to show him touching his forelock to the church authorities, close reading reveals that Vico’s assertion that there are two histories, that of the Hebrews and that of pagans, does not reflect his true position on the history of humankind, but is a view put forward to save him from accusations of heresy.

One of the defining factors in the transition from medievalism to modernism, and, in turn, from modernism to postmodernism, was the resurgence of science during the Renaissance period. In keeping with the thesis that Vico’s philosophy displays his willingness to draw on the work of others, chapter 3, ‘From Modern to Postmodern: The Search for a Method’, sets out to trace the rediscovery and development of the interest in science from the introduction of the printing press to the modern approach of Descartes, and to show how the search for a scientific method of inquiry by his predecessors influenced the ‘postmodern’ approach of Vico. Having established Vico’s credentials as a precursor of postmodernist thought chapter 4, ‘What is Postmodernism?’ seeks to establish the *locus classicus* of the term ‘postmodernism’. It will show that whilst the term itself is nebulous, Vico’s *magnum opus* not only meets many of the definitions given for this genre, it also meets the criteria set by the two great pillars of postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida. By way of endorsing Vico’s credentials as a postmodernist, chapter 5, ‘Towards Postmodernism’, will develop the argument that Vico *New Science* anticipates much, indeed if not all, of the features that we identify with postmodernism by comparing his philosophical approach to that of Ihab Hassan, Michel Foucault, Friedrich
Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre. To emphasize Vico’s postmodern approach, chapter 6 will consider the influence of Vico’s philosophy of two of Literature’s, as well as Ireland’s, most recognized postmodern writers, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. As is shown in chapter 4, a central theme of postmodernism is the view that since all worldviews are constructed by men, they can be deconstructed, dismantled and demystified by men. In drawing this thesis to a close it seems appropriate to show how Vico employs this characteristic in his treatment of grand narratives. In particular it will show Vico’s deconstruction the legend of Homer, his dissemination of the ‘true narrative’ of Adam, and his dismantling of Descartes’ *Cogito*. In short, this thesis sets out to show that the ‘postmodern condition’ is not an approach that necessarily arose from recent historical events or philosophical realisations, but is a condition revealed in the work of at least one eighteenth-century thinker.
Chapter 1: Vico’s Sources

Introduction

Probably the first thing that can be said of Vico’s sources is that they are many and varied and that his New Science draws freely not only from an eclectic mix of those whose work he admired and accepted, but also from those whose work he condemned and ultimately rejected. Central to Vico’s philosophy is the view that ideas and concepts are not innate but arise in virtue of the collective consciousness (or, more accurately, the collective unconsciousness) of the community – the sensus communis. That is, that one’s ideas are formed by the society to which one is exposed. When we investigate Vico’s sources we are reminded that society or community can take different forms and that the ideas that shape us are not just those found in our immediate social environment. Indeed, the concern voiced today by so many in relation to the influence of television, the Internet and other outside forces, such as peer groups and spurious religious sects, bears testimony to this fact. It might be argued that what the Internet is to today’s youth is what his father’s book-shop was to the young Giambattista Vico, and the library of the castle of Cilento at Vatolla was to the eighteen year old Vico – a virtual reality where values, traditional and contemporary, could be measured against each other. Thus, as well as the influences of the immediate Neapolitan society into which he was born, we find such literary and philosophical giants as Homer, Tacticus, Lucretius, Varro, Plato, Aristotle, Pufendorf, Grotius, Selden, Hobbes, Spinoza, Valla, Descartes, Bacon, Le Clerc and many more. Vico’s history of philosophy revolves around four central themes: (1) that the history of humankind – the ideal eternal history of humankind - is a cyclical process which moves through three different stages
before returning to the original; (2) that the myths and legends of ancient nations are in fact true histories which arise from the collective common sense judgements of the community – the sensus communis, under the direction of divine providence; (3) that man can only know to be true that which he makes – the verum ipsum factum principle; (4) and that these issues can all be investigated in the light of his new form of criticism – his scienza nouva. This thesis will show that, while Vico must be credited with bringing these ideas together to form a cohesive philosophical unit, they are by no means his ideas but ideas gleaned or ‘borrowed’ from the sensus communis of his own unique environment. It will investigate Vico’s sources in order that we might locate him in the history of philosophy, and that we might see, even for thinkers of the calibre of Vico, that no philosopher’s mind is an island unto itself.

The history of humankind as a cyclical process involving three distinct ages

According to Giambattista Vico the history of humankind is a cyclical process involving eternal ricorsi or revolutions each of which consists of three distinct ages: the age of gods, the age of heroes, the age of men. During the age of men, human reason reaches its zenith and then descends into chaos - at which time the whole cyclical process begins again. It should be said from the outset that this notion of history as a cyclical process is not an original idea. In fact, in Medieval Italy, as well as other European countries at that time, it was commonly held that human history was governed by the same laws as the four seasons; the linear view of history was taken from the Judeao-Christian tradition which, since it derived from desert people, was not subject to the same recurring seasonal variations. Peter Burke reminds us that Vico was well familiar with this traditional cyclical view of history and says that Vico took this idea from the
ancient Greek historian Polybius (c. 203–c. 120 BC) ‘who suggested that monarchy was naturally followed by aristocracy and aristocracy by democracy, and when democracy went into decline, monarchy came around again’. Vico himself admits familiarity with Marcus Terentius Varro’s three ages of history: (i) the mythical age; (ii) the dark age, and (iii) the historical age, and he admits also that his concept greatly profits ‘from the antiquity of the Egyptians’ – ‘l’antichità degli egizi’ who, according to Herodotus, says Vico, also divided the history of humankind into different phases: ‘(1) the age of the gods, (2) the age of heroes, and (3) the age of men’ – ‘la prima degli dèi, la seconda degli eroi e la terza degli uomini’. Vico was also familiar with the works of Plato and Aristotle and would have known of the theory of a cyclical historical process advanced by Plato in the Republic in ‘The Myth of Er’, as well as Aristotle’s concept of eternal recurrence. In the Stagerite’s cyclical world process, a concept which Vico freely adopted to explain the Flood, the sun forever evaporates the waters of the earth, lifts the moisture into the atmosphere to form clouds, then falls again to reform the rivers and the seas. Like Vico, Aristotle sees human civilisation repeatedly reaching its zenith only to fall back into barbarism and begin again. Donald Kunze informs us that Vico was also familiar with the notion of eternal recurrence in Macrobius’ Commentary on the dream of Scipio. In this work

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25 ibid., para, 52.
26 ibid.
27 ibid., para, 62.
29 see NS, para, 62.
30 see Will Durant. Op.cit. (ibid.)
31 see Donald Kunze Thought and Place: the architecture of eternal place in the philosophy of Giambattista Vico. 1987, p. 143. Peter Lang Inc. New York
Macrobius, the fifth century Latin author, brings together the threads of Cicero’s story of a dream of Scipio Africanus’ grandson. A dream, Kunze reminds us, that ‘parallels in many ways the famous “Myth of Er”’, and in which civilisation is explained as a ‘motion of the soul between wetness (the Flood?) and dryness’.

While there seems to be no doubt that Vico took inspiration for his cyclical historical process from Greek and Roman sources, he also found confirmation of his thesis in the works of the Jesuit father Michele Ruggieri, who had ‘seen Chinese books that were printed before the coming of Christ’, of Father Martini, whose History of China Vico had read; and of Nicolas Trigault, whose Christian Mission to China, says Vico, is ‘better informed that either Ruggieri or Martini’. When we compare Vico’s view that ‘... in the dense and dark night which envelops remotest antiquity, there shines an eternal and inextinguishable light’ (‘... in tal densa notte di tenebre ond’ è coverta la prima da noi lontanissima antichità, apparece questo lume eterno’) with a recurring theme in some Chinese stories where ‘a ray of light emerges out of chaos and builds the sky’, it seems fair to conclude that not only do the Italian philosopher’s words bear a strong resemblance to those of his Oriental cousins, but also that his view that the history of humankind inevitably moves to dissolution and chaos is also strikingly similar.
That Vico took his inspiration for his cyclical concept of the history of humankind from these sources is without question. That he firmly believed this process to be a true representation of human history also appears to be also without question. However, on his own evidence this thesis fails to hold true. As Robert Flint points out, on Vico’s own admission, Assyria was only known to have experienced one of these three stages38 - the other two would have to be ‘conjecturally affirmed on the ground that the law of three stages had elsewhere prevailed’.39 Even in relation to Italy, Flint goes on to say, Vico represents the age of gods as a stage of history that is not proper to Roman history.40 It should also be pointed out that the American Indian nation, which, it might be argued, moved from the age of gods to dissolution without passing through an age of dispassionate reason, does not conform to Vico’s worldview. Indeed, it might also be argued that as long as the people of any nation continue to create the concept of the ideal human being by bestowing attributes of exaggerated heroic proportions onto some of their political, literary, and religious leaders, both past and present, they too will fail to move beyond the age of heroes. As Robert Flint says, Vico, in his anxiety to show that all histories were subject to the same historical process, ‘did great violence to chronology, without succeeding... in establishing the thesis’.41

38 Vico asserts that the Assyrians “sprang abruptly on the historical scene, like a frog born of a summer shower” (NS, para, 738) and landed, as an established monarchy, in the age of heroes.
40 ibid.
41 ibid.
**Sensus Communis, myths, legends, and natural law**

According to Vico the myths and legends of early man were not ‘absurd fantasies of helpless primitives, or deliberate inventions designed to delude the masses and secure their obedience to cunning and unscrupulous masters’, rather they were true representations of the laws, institutions, religions, and other rules of societal behaviour that arose spontaneously from man’s experience with the natural world. Vico calls the collective mind of the people the *sensus communis*, by which he means the common sense judgements of the community. Myths and legends, then, contain the true values of these early people’s lives. The heroes around whom these myths are built were not real men but poetical heroes – physical embodiments of an anthropomorphic mode of thought who represent ‘the common sense, unreflecting judgement shared by an entire social order, people, nation, or even all of humankind’ (*Il senso comune è un guidizio senz’ alcuna riflessione, comunemente sentito da tutto un ordine, da tutto un popolo, da tutta una naziona o da tutto il gener umano*). For example, amongst the many popular myths of the ancient Greeks that Vico was familiar with was the anonymous Hymn of Hermes (c. the 8th or 7th century BC). Hermes was son of the midwife Maia and the god Zeus. According to the myth, Hermes finds a tortoise, cuts off its limbs and scoops out the marrow, then, with the aid of reeds and strings, turns the creature into a lyre. In Vichean terms, Hermes is a poetical or imagined hero whose instinctive creative act of ‘metamorphosising’ the tortoise into a lyre represents, in microcosm, the spontaneous or unreflecting arising of values or ideas from the consensus of the community – the *sensus communis*. In the *New Science*, Vico turns to Homer to

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43 Vico. NS, para, 142.
44 see ibid., para, 89.
illustrate his belief that ancient heroes are poetic archetypes rather than real people. Works like the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are not the works of one man, says Vico, but 'rhapsodes of which [the Greek people] were themselves the authors' ('rapsòdi... de' quali essi eran autori'). Evidence of this, and of Vico's view that 'universals' are general terms for mutable principles and values rather than givens fixed for all time, is found in the section of the *New Science* entitled 'Discovery of the True Homer' ('Della Discoverta del Vero Omero') where Vico points out that in the *Iliad*, which was composed by a youthful Homer, that is 'when Greece was young and therefore burning with sublime passions' ('quando era giovinetta la Grecia e, 'n conseguenza, ardentie di sublimi passioni'),

the hero possesses such attributes as pride, anger, and revenge, such as those embodied in Achilles, 'the hero of violence' ('eroe della forza'), whereas the hero of the *Odyssey*, which was written when Homer was in old age, that is, 'when the spirits of Greece had been somewhat cooled by reflection', ('quando la Grecia aveva alquanto raffreddato gli animi con la riflessione'), was Ulysses, 'the hero of wisdom' ('eroe della sapienza').

Thus, says Vico, we see that 'the Homer who was author of the *Iliad* preceded by many centuries the Homer who was author of the *Odyssey*' ('l'Omero autor dell' Iliade avere di molt' eta preceduto l'Omero autore dell' Odissea'). In other words, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are not the works of one man, nor are they 'absurd fantasies of helpless primitives', but true

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45 see Liberato Santoro Brienza's *The Tortoise and the Lyre*. 1993, pp. 3-4. Irish Academy Press. Dublin.
46 Vico. NS, para, 878.
47 ibid., para, 879.
48 ibid.
49 ibid.
50 ibid.
51 ibid., para, 880
representations of the spontaneous or unreflected judgements of the Greek people at different times in their history.

Gianfranco Cantelli reminds us that Vico considered his concept of the myths of the early poets as true histories of the customs of the ancient people of Greece as ‘the master key’\(^{52}\) to his new science. The methodology of Vico’s science, which advocates a careful and thorough examination of fables as historical documents, owes much to the work being done in Vico’s own time of Jean Le Clerc (1657-1736), the Protestant French editor of *Bibliothèque ancienne et moderne* (*Ancient and Modern Library*, 1714-22). As well as sharing Le Clerc’s view that ancient myths could be related to pagan history, Vico also took the view that the ‘universal’ truths of the primitive man were not comparable to those of more civilised people. He agreed with Le Clerc that the history of the Hebrew people was separate from that of pagan history, and that myths were not constructed by cunning political and religious leaders in order to control the masses.\(^{53}\) However, it should be noted, that while, for Le Clerc, ‘the myth is a true and proper historical account, to be understood exactly like a modern historical narrative...[f]or Vico, myth constituted instead a primitive expression of fantasy’.\(^{54}\) In other words, while, for Le Clerc, myths represent a history of facts, for Vico they represent a history of the origin of ideas. Nonetheless, it must be accepted that Le Clerc’s concept of fables as historical documents had a decisive influence on Vico’s interpretation of myths.

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53 ibid.
Donald Phillip Verene, in his *Vico’s Science of Imagination* (1981), also reminds us that the key to understanding Vico’s science is his idea interpreting myths as representations of ‘universal truths’ or, as Vico called them, ‘imaginative universals’ (‘universali fantastici’) which emerge in virtue of the spontaneous judgements of the *sensus communis*. As seen above, an example of what Vico means by myth as an ‘imaginative universal’ is his view that heroes such as Homer, Hercules or Achilles were not representations of real heroic individuals but of a poetic thought of the heroic ideal that arose from the collective mind of the community. In the same way that each nation produced its own Jupiter, its own imagined deity, so too did each community produce its own ideal man. However, while this may indeed be the key to understanding Vico’s science, Harold Stone makes the point that the idea of the imagined archetype was not unique to Vico and that as early as the ninth century a similar notion was advanced by Agnellus da Ravenna, a writer whose work would certainly have been accessible to Vico since his book featured as a lead article in the same issue of the journal, *Giornale de’ Letterati*, that reviewed Vico’s *Study Methods of Our Time*. Agnellus, an abbot, in his *Liber pontificatis Ravennatenis*, wrote the biographical history of the forty-five bishops of Ravenna. Notwithstanding the fact that in this work Agnellus clearly states that many of the accounts of the lives he chronicles have no oral or written tradition, he strenuously holds that from imaginative reconstructions based on portraits of these men, he could construct legitimate representations of the true character of each. Because these men were, like himself, bishops of the Church, Agnellus believed he could intuit all that

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54 ibid., p. 48.
55 see Vico: NS, para, 209
56 see Verene. Op.cit (ibid., pp. 65-95)
was required to know of their lives.\footnote{ibid., 284.} Thus, in the same way that Agnellus recreates imaginative universals of his saintly predecessors, so too do Vico’s early poets create mythical archetypes of all that they held virtuous.

Vico’s interest in natural law dates back to his youth when he was attracted to the writings of Suarez, Grotius, Selden, and Pufendorf. Francis Suarez (1558-1617) was a Spanish philosopher who questioned whether individual nations had the right to establish their own legislative systems, and whether the law of nations was synonymous with natural law. Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), of whose work Vico acknowledged ‘...enlarged his thoughts and gave him a strong onward impulse’,\footnote{Robert Flint: \textit{Vico}. 1881, p. 40. William Blackwood and Sons (Cheap Edition). Edinburgh and Brighton} in his \textit{Law of War and Peace} (1625), defined natural law as ‘the dictates of “right reason” or “common sense”, summarised it as respect for others, equated it... with the law of nations, and declared that it would retain its validity even if God did not exist’.\footnote{Peter Burke. \textit{Vico.} 1985, p. 33. Oxford University Press. Oxford.} Grotius’ ambition was to establish a system of international law by arguing that, philosophically and historically, it was an extension of a rationality existing universally in the natural law of nations. While Vico acknowledges his debt to Grotius, in his \textit{New Science}, he refers to Grotius’ work only to criticise it for failing to recognise the metaphysical importance of God.\footnote{see Vico, NS. para, 394.} John Selden (1584-1654) was an English scholar who declared that natural law was ‘what natural reason establishes in all men’,\footnote{Burke: Op.cit. (ibid., p. 33)} and Samuel Pufendorf (1632-1694), a German jurist, echoed Aristotle by positing the view that man is essentially a sociable animal, and that ‘living in society is living
according to the law of nature'. 63 While Vico accepted that the writings of Grotius, Selden, and Pufendorf, or, as he called them, these ‘princes of the law of nations’ (‘principi... del diritto natural delle gente’), 64 gave him insights into the ways of philosophy, he nonetheless held that their failure to recognise the difference between Hebrew law and pagan law, or, indeed, between historical law and philosophical law, was a serious error. Grotius, he rejected because he had severed law from religion; Selden was criticised for positing the view that the nature of early man was essentially benign, arguing that human nature was more beast than divine, 65 and Pufendorf was reproached for his idea that man was ‘cast into the world without God’s aid or care’ (‘gittato in questo mondo senza niun aiuto e cura di Dio’). 66 These thinkers were wrong to believe that ancients had been men and women like themselves, with thoughts and feelings like their own. 67 For Vico, the nature of man is less the noble savage and more the Lucretian-style brute, 68 draws our attention to the fact that many scholars believe that Vico took his vision of the first men as bestioni – savage brutes – from Lucretius’ De Rerum Natura in which the ‘Roman poet described the gigantic sizes early beings attained and evoked the fear that thunder inspired in early men’. 69 Thus, while Vico shares the view that natural law is a universal idea, unlike his ‘princes of natural law’, it is an idea which manifests itself in different guises during different stages of the ideal eternal history of humankind. It is a law that is a corollary of religion; it is

63 ibid.
64 Vico. NS, para, 493.
65 ibid., para, 396.
66 ibid., para, 397.
68 see ibid.
69 ibid.
ordained by providence, and it arises in virtue of the common sense judgements of the community - the sensus communis - to meet the spontaneous needs of the community.

As shown in his treatment of Grotius, Selden, and Pufendorf, Vico makes something of a habit of denigrating many of those to whom he owed much. One other who meets this description is Benedict Spinoza (1632-77), whom Vico criticises for 'making God an infinite spirit subject to fate' ('che danno Dio in infinita mente soggetta al fato')\(^{70}\) and for discussing 'the commonwealth as if it were a society of shopkeepers' ('di repubblica come d'una società che fusse di mercadanti'),\(^{71}\) and yet whose doctrine of providence, Frederick Vaughan points out,\(^{72}\) bears a striking resemblance to that which would later emerge in Vico's *New Science*. We first encounter Spinoza's influence on Vico in his concept of providence which appears in chapter three, 'Of the Vocation of the Hebrews', of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* where he says: 'I have said before and shown elsewhere that the universal laws of nature, according to which all things exist and are determined, are only another name for the eternal decrees of God'.\(^{73}\) This concept is developed further when, in the immediately following paragraph, he asserts, '... to say that everything happens according to natural laws and to say that everything is ordained by the decree and ordinance of God is the same thing'.\(^{74}\) When we consider these remarks and one that appears later in the *Tractatus*, when Spinoza remarks that 'God, and consequently His

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70 Vico, NS, para, 335
71 ibid.
74 ibid.
providence, are merely the order of nature’,75 we see that Spinoza’s concept is repeated almost verbatim by Vico in his New Science where he talks of ‘the eternal idea of God, who is eternal order’ (‘l’idea eterna di Dio, ch’altro non è che ordine eterno’).76 Thus, while it may have suited Vico to decry the work of one whose work had been put on the Index of Prohibited Books, it seems that he had more in common with his Dutch contemporary than he was prepared to admit.

In his Autobiography, Vico identifies Cornelius Tacitus (ca. 55-120 A.D.) as one of his early influences.77 Along with Plato, whom he salutes because he contemplates man as he should be, he salutes Tacitus because he contemplates man as he is.78 However, what Vico fails to say is that Machiavelli (1469-1527), a thinker much closer to his own time than his Roman historian mentor, also calls for man to be considered as he is rather than as he ought to be. Although Machiavelli is only mentioned twice by name in the New Science,79 it must be argued that his shadow looms large in Vico’s philosophy. For example, Vico’s remarks that ‘the supreme authority of laws follows the supreme authority of arms’ (‘il sommo imperio delle leggi va di séguito al sommo imperio dell’armi’),80 and ‘once warfare has made a people so fierce that human laws no longer have a place among them, religion is the only means powerful enough to subdue them’ (‘Ove i popoli son infieriti con le armi, talché non vi abbiano più luogo l’umane

75 ibid., p. 189
76 Vico. NS, para, 590
78 ibid.
79 see Vico. NS, paras, 1003, 1109
80 ibid., para 594
leggi, l'unico potente mezzo di ridurgli è la religione\),\textsuperscript{81} as Frederick Vaughan points out, bear all the hallmarks of Machiavelli’s \textit{Discourses}.	extsuperscript{82} It should also be noted that Machiavelli’s acknowledged authority for this work is Tacitus.\textsuperscript{83} An authority, that is, in whom he shares respect, as we have seen, with Giambattista Vico.

\textit{Verum ipsum factum}

Vico’s ‘big idea’ is the principle of \textit{verum ipsum factum}: the principle that men can only know to be true that which they themselves make.\textsuperscript{84} The discovery of this principle is considered to be unique to Vico, as well as his most important contribution to the history of philosophy. In discussing the Italian philosopher’s view that the world of men is made by men, Isaiah Berlin calls it ‘Vico’s greatest single claim to immortality’,\textsuperscript{85} while Edward Said not only describes Vico’s conception of it as an ‘exhilarating discovery’,\textsuperscript{86} but goes on to describe Vico as the ‘prototypical modern thinker… and [that] in order to understand the debt owed Vico… we must attempt finally to understand his work as having begun a significant process’.\textsuperscript{87} Although Harold Samuel Stone agrees that Vico’s principle is of significant importance to the history of philosophy, he is not so sure that the concept is peculiar to Vico alone. According to Stone, there is evidence that Vico may have taken his \textit{verum ipsum factum} principle, at least in part, from the primary editor of the Elzevier Greek edition of the New Testament, Daniel Heinsius. It

seems that Heinsius, in his Nonnus, Paraphrasus in Joannem (Paraphrase of the Gospel of St. John, 1627) draws attention to two specific references to making and knowing in the writings of St. John. According to Stone, Vico, who was familiar with Heinsius’ work, failed to acknowledge his debt to Heinsius because the 1627 edition of Nonnus was put on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1632. It should not be expected that Vico, who, as Stone reminds us, is known ‘to have played by the rules in these matters’, would bring himself to the attention of the authorities by acknowledging his debt to one who was condemned as a heretic. However, it must be argued that the connection that Stone makes appears to be a leap too far as the references of which he speaks do not make the same case for making and knowing as Vico. That is, the first, which appears in chapter 3, verse 21 of St John’s Gospel speaks of ‘the one who makes the truth’ (qui autem facit veritatem), and the second is found in chapter 1, verse 7 of St John’s First Epistle and appears in the form of the negative where John, discussing God as light, says ‘and we do not make the truth’ (et veritatem non facimus), clearly refer to truths which are created by a force which is other than man.

Notwithstanding the fact that Berlin hails the verum/factum principle as Vico’s greatest contribution to philosophy he does acknowledge that, by Vico’s time, it was a theological commonplace and that its

... doctrine ultimately stems from the Augustinian dogma that God by knowing creates, that for him knowing and creating are one, [that]... God alone knows all because he

creates all; man, because he is made in God’s image, has limited powers of creation, and therefore knowledge only of what he himself creates and nothing else.\(^\text{90}\)

Evidence to support Berlin’s view can be found in Massimo Lollini’s belief that the most likely influence of Vico’s principle came from the Renaissance humanist, Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457). Valla, whom Lollini informs us Vico had read, held that the primordial experience of the passions was the basis of human culture.\(^\text{91}\) Danilo Marcondas, of the Philosophy Department of the Pontificia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, also recognises the influence of Valla on Vico and says that the latter’s *verum/factum* principle represents Valla’s view that “meaning should be seen as a creative activity… and that in consequence the use of language shapes our experience of the world both social and natural”.\(^\text{92}\) As if to underline the multifarious nature of Vico’s sources, Amos Funkenstein sees Thomas Hobbes as the inspiration for Vico’s *verum ipsum factum* principle. Vico’s connections with Hobbes are many, says Funkenstein: ‘[h]e too stresses the epistemological primacy of matters political over the physical sciences: *verum et factum convertuntur*, and civil society is for him as it was for Hobbes a human artefact’.\(^\text{93}\) M. H. Fisch and T.G. Bergin, in their introduction to their translation of Vico’s autobiography, point to the fact that Vico took from Hobbes the notion that the first founders of civil society, rather than being philosophers filled with recondite wisdom which he had hitherto thought but man-beasts

\(^{90}\) ibid.

\(^{91}\) Berlin, Op.cit. (ibid., p. 140)


devoid of culture or humanity, yet guided by an obscure instinct for self-preservation that in time would draw them into social compact and lay the foundation-stone of civilisation.94

In the New Science, Vico acknowledges that Hobbes’ aspiration to consider man within the whole of the human race was a noble one, however, he tempers his admiration by adding that Hobbes’ failure to recognise the role of providence in the origin of human institutions was a serious error.95 In the light of the above evidence, it seems fair to conclude that Vico may well have taken his verum ipsum factum principle from concepts that were already ‘in the air’, developed them, coined a phrase for them, and made the principle that emerged from them his own. If this is the case, then, by Vico’s own definition, it establishes him as a latterday theological poet: one whose creations are not drawn from some transcendent realm but are reflections of spontaneous common sense judgements of the people of the community.

La Scienza Nuova

Although Vico was vehemently opposed to Rationalism he was by no means anti reason. In fact the methodology of his New Science, the title of which was inspired by Bacon’s Novum Organum and ‘still more by Galileo’s Dialogue delle Nuove Scienze’,96 involves a careful and painstaking study of ancient myths, literature, and languages of past nations, so that one might uncover the true history of humankind. In other words, Vico advocates a reasoned study of the

95 see Vico, NS, para, 179.
96 see M. H. Fisch & T.G.Bergin. op.cit. (ibid., p. 20)
laws, institutions, principles and values of past nations, as ordained by providence, and recorded in their myths and legends, as the method of his new science. This method he calls the *rational civil theology of divine providence.* The concern for a systematic method of enquiry is not one that is peculiar to Vico but one that had been already employed by Descartes. Thus, while he went on to reject Descartes’ philosophical approach, he did not do so without gaining some advantage from his scientific method. As Cecelia Miller says,

... when reading Descartes one is struck more forcefully by the parallels with Vico than the contrasts. Repeatedly the same issues were addressed (imagination, memory, will, good or common sense) even though the conclusions are contradictory... both believed they had found a new method which would explain and unify all subjects.

Miller also makes the point that Descartes deserves to rank with Vico’s four other ‘acknowledged *autori*,’ Plato, Tacitus, Francis Bacon, and Hugo Grotius. *Autori*, that is, who, although he found imperfections in their respective philosophies, strongly influenced his own philosophical approach.

If Vico was once a Cartesian, he was also a Baconian. Indeed, while he eventually rejected Cartesianism, it could be argued that he remained something of a Baconian throughout the remainder of his life. I say ‘something’, for, while he held that the scientific method of enquiry

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97 Vico, NS, para, 2.
advanced by Francis Bacon could not, as Bacon intended, reveal the essence of things in nature, Vico employed the same principles to investigate those things which we can know: the laws, institutions, customs, and practices made by man. In the *New Science*, Vico acknowledges his debt to Bacon, but informs us that he has transferred the philosophical method of the English philosopher 'from the natural phenomena studied in his *Thoughts and Conclusions on Nature* to our human civil institutions' ('dalle naturali, sulle quali esso lavorò il libro Cogitata visa, trasportato all'umane cose civile').\footnote{ibid., p. 10.} Using this method, which Bacon calls 'contemplating and seeing' ('cogitare videre'),\footnote{ibid., para, 359.} Vico aims to separate '... the truth from falsehood in whatever popular tradition has preserved for many centuries' ('... vi si vaglia dal falso il vero in tutto ciò che per lungo tratto di secoli ce ne hanno custodito le volgari tradizioni').\footnote{ibid., para, 356.} However, while Vico was prepared to pay homage to Bacon, he also held that the English philosopher, in dedicating himself to the study of nature, 'had misunderstood both the capacities of the human mind and the development of the human race'.\footnote{Anthony Grafton. Op.cit. (ibid., p, xvi)} For Vico, only God can understand the secrets of nature, human beings should concentrate their studies, not on nature, which, since it remains outside them, they can never know, but on that which they can know: the laws, institutions, customs, and practices which they themselves make. For Vico, because Descartes' 'clear and distinct' idea of God is *a priori*, already in the mind, it is not made by man, therefore it cannot be said with certainty to be true; and since it cannot be held to be true, it cannot be held to be the criterion for other truths, let alone demonstrate knowledge of the existence of God. Although
man imitates God by creating, his creations do not privilege him to know the true nature of things, merely to knowledge of things created from his own imagination. Thus, for Vico, man’s reasoning powers are constrained by his imagination. The truths on which physics depends are truths which man himself has created and therefore cannot be held to be absolute or unalterable truths. In short, man cannot, as Bacon held, attain knowledge of things in nature; rather it is that he can know only that which he has created from within the boundaries of his own imagination. For Vico, these ‘imagined’ truths derive from a consensus between knowledge amassed in virtue of the Baconian experimental method and the powers of reason as determined by man’s time and place in the ideal eternal history of humankind.

Conclusion

During Vico’s formative years Naples was the ‘freest thinking society in Italy’. Amongst the philosophies being explored at that time were the Epicurianism of Pierre Gassandi, the modern naturalism of the Renaissance pioneers Telesio, Bruno, and Campanella, and the experimentalism of Galileo and Bacon. Although the prevailing interest was in Gassandi and Descartes, over time, it was the Cartesianism that became the dominant philosophy of the age. Indeed, so pervasive was this philosophy that ‘the highest praise of a philosopher was that he understands the Meditations of Descartes’. While Vico was initially drawn into the Cartesian web, in virtue of his willingness to investigate the works and thoughts of other writers and thinkers, it became his policy never to align himself to any one system of thought. Indeed, so

105 see ibid., p. 138
106 ibid.
committed was he to the policy of keeping oneself open to the ideas of others that, in his oration ‘On the Study Methods of Our Time’ (‘De Nostri Temporis Studiorum Ratione’), he exhorted ‘young students to grapple with all kinds of disciplines, and to discourse about their advantages and disadvantages, so that they may attain those and escape these’\textsuperscript{107} (‘i giovani ad ogni genere, non è convien che ne discorra, affinché seguano i vantaggi ed evitino i difetti’).\textsuperscript{108} By the time Vico came to present this oration in a series of orations given to the Royal University of Naples between 1699 and 1707, the nuclei of much that would later emerge as the New Science were beginning to crystallise in his mind. However, while it should be acknowledged that what did emerge is a philosophical tour de force, it should also be recognised that Vico’s magnum opus is less the work of an original thinker and more a conduit in which and through which others’ ideas and concepts, albeit in a novel format, are collated and presented.

Chapter 2: From Heresy to Postmodernism

Introduction

A recurring trope of Vico’s *New Science* is the view that individual consciousness does not frame social consciousness, but that social consciousness – the sensus communis - shapes individual consciousness. A recurring trope of philosopher Michel Foucault’s ‘postmodern’ approach (more of this is in chapter 4) is that disciplinary institutions constitute individual consciousness.109 In order to understand the societal influences that contributed to the shaping of his *New Science* this chapter turns to place Vico’s thesis within a historico-cultural context. That is, it turns to consider the city of Naples leading up to and including Vico’s lifetime in this his native city. Amongst other things, the term ‘postmodernism’ implies a questioning of orthodox theories, values, and beliefs - an examination of ‘grand narratives’. During Vico’s time the term employed for anyone daring to attempt such an approach was ‘heresy’. In the *New Science* Vico asserts that there are two histories of humankind: the sacred history of the Hebrews, and the history of gentiles or pagans. However, it becomes clear to the reader that, while Vico makes passing references to the former, his main focus of interest is on the history of the latter. This chapter also offers the view that the ‘two history’ paradigm set out in Vico’s *New Science* does not reflect his true position of the history of humankind, rather that it was a view put forward to avoid accusations of heresy by the Roman Inquisition or the Index of Prohibited Books.

Italy: 1530 to 1750

In 1530, in the city of Bologna, Italy promptly re-entered the Holy Roman Empire when Pope Clement VII placed the imperial crown upon Spain's Charles V - an empire it might be pointed out that now stretched from Vienna to Seville, and on to South America. By 1559, when it fell by treaty to the Spanish branch of the Habsburgs, and Milan, Sicily, Sardinia, and Naples became a Spanish possession, Italy was no longer recognisable as the country that spawned Petrarch, Boccacio, Dante, or Machiavelli, but a land, virtually enslaved, 'crushed, dismembered, and exhausted', which soon descended into a state of decadence. In Naples itself the Spanish rule was, in the main, tyrannical and oppressive.

In 1701 the Spanish branch of the Habsburgs died out and was replaced by French Bourbon rulers. At the convocation for the Peace of Utrecht in 1713 Milan, Sardinia, and Naples were given over by the Spanish to Austrian rule, and from 1737, when the last of the Medici's died, Tuscany also had an Austrian ruler. The predominance of Austria was to last until Napoleon invaded Italy in 1796 and reorganised it a short time later. Thus, for nigh on two hundred and fifty years Italy, for the most part, was under foreign rule. In the country in general, and in Naples in particular, these years were characterised by a crushing taxation which left the people wretched and hungry. As Robert Flint explains, the 'marvellous display of intellectual force

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110 see Vincent Cronin: *A Concise History of Italy*. 1973, p. 156. Cassell & Company Ltd. London and Johannesburg
111 The Habsburgs, one of the principal sovereign dynasties of Europe from the fifteenth century to the twentieth century, ruled Hungary, Bohemia, Netherlands, Luxemburg, Burgundy from 1526 until 1918, and Spain and the Spanish Empire (Spain, Naples, Sicily, and Sardinia, as well as New World possessions) from 1504 until 1700. (see: www.hfac.uh.edu/gbrown/philosophers/leibniz/BritannicalPages/Habsburg/Habsburg.html 24/08/04)
which characterised [Italy at this time] was almost equalled by the infidelity, selfishness, and depravity which it revealed in the ruling and literary classes; the result was that instead of progress there was rapid deterioration. In a country cursed by a ‘strict and bigoted censorship’ the misery of physical and mental oppression was such that ‘few Italians looked beyond the present or their own restricted horizons’. The classics were emasculated as they had been in the Middle Ages, and although still the staple of education, they were taken as models of language and style, while their content was ignored. Censorship was so inhibiting that poets were reduced to writing ‘mere trifles, few of which have withstood the test of time’. Philosophical speculation was equally vapid, particularly in the arena of political theory, since no thinker was prepared to challenge the accepted view that political absolutism was the instrument of divine providence. It is symptomatic of the time that Vico felt compelled to pay homage to this instrument in his *magnum opus*.

By the time of Vico, then, Italy and Naples were in deep decline. Poetry of any significance was virtually non-existent; there was no freedom of thought in religious matters, and scholars were reluctant to cultivate any studies that might lead to the disapproval of the priests and magistrates. With the exception of the eight or nine years he spent as tutor to the children of the Don Domenica Rocca, Marquis of Vatolla, Vico lived his entire life within the kingdom of Naples. For the first thirty-two years of Vico’s life, Charles II of Spain was its sovereign. As was the

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113 see Cronin. Op.cit. (ibid.)
114 Flint. Op.cit (ibid., p. 6)
116 (ibid.)
117 (ibid.)
custom, governance was given over to viceroys who had little interest in ruling well. Following the death of Charles II in 1700, Europe was plunged into the War of Succession, and for the next thirteen years Naples became a scene of almost continuous ‘strife, conspiracy and misrule’.\(^{119}\) From the time it came under the rule of Charles II until 1734 Naples was governed by Austrian viceroys whose ineptitude forced them to rule by the sword. From 1743 until 1759, fifteen years after Vico’s death, the kingdom fell to the rule of Charles IV, who, with the aid of his minister, Tuscan Bernardo di Tanucci, introduced a uniform legal code into the sovereignty and curtailed some of the clergy’s privileges.\(^{120}\) However, the income accrued from the latter reform was not used to feed for the benefit of the poor and hungry but to build the Teatro San Carlo in the city of Naples and the Capo di Monte palace, and also on the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum.

**Vico’s Naples**

The Naples of Vico, then, was a kingdom and a city whose sovereign was almost always absent. It was a region whose viceroys were free agents as long as they succeeded in pleasing their masters. While the viceroys had the support of a supreme council, neither had any real interest in the common people. In such an atmosphere the frustration of the people manifested itself from time to time in insurrection, but none succeeded in attaining any satisfactory response from a corrupt and fraudulent regime. Taxes were scandalously unjust and loaded glaringly in favour of the privileged classes. Commerce had ceased to all but a trickle, and the land so plundered that the once luxuriant soil was reduced to a virtual desert. The life of the peasant was wretched, and

\(^{118}\) ibid.

\(^{119}\) Flint. Op.cit.,ibid., p. 8

\(^{120}\) see Cronin. Op. cit., ibid., p. 157
outlaws or bandits were so numerous that the nobles became virtual prisoners in their own castles and citizens were confined to live within the walls of their own towns. Paradoxically, since there was little or no restriction on the numbers admitted to the legal profession, amidst this crying lack of justice, there was an abundance of legal practitioners, and most of these, Robert Flint informs us, ‘were of a very mean character’. The power of the Catholic Church was great, and its wealth enormous. The Roman Inquisition was still active in Naples and the Pope constantly meddled in affairs of state. Any philosophy that assumed an anti-religious or anti-Church approach was not tolerated; and philosophers and other free thinkers were keenly aware of the price Galileo had paid for ‘the intrusion of his discoveries into cosmology’. Or, indeed, of the fact that ‘Pietro Giannone had paid for his outspokenness with excommunication, a miserable life of exile, and death in prison’. It is worth recording that Giannone was a contemporary of Vico’s and that, of four men brought to trial by the Inquisition in 1691 accused of believing that the universe was composed of atoms; that Adam was not the first man to inhabit the earth, and that Christ was an impostor, two of them, Giacinto De Cristoforo and Nicola Galizia, were intimate friends of the Neapolitan philosopher. In a climate in which philosophical speculation was so actively discouraged, it is not surprising that Vico was anxious to present his thesis in a way that would avoid accusations of heresy.

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121 Flint: Op.cit. (ibid., p. 12)
122 Ibid.
A definition of heresy

The term 'heresy' derives from the Greek *haeresis*. Originally this was a neutral term that simply signified the holding of a particular set of philosophical opinions. However, once appropriated by Christianity it came to infer disapproval. This sense of disapprobation arose because the Roman Catholic Church, satisfied that it alone was the one true church, saw itself as the custodian of a divinely imparted revelation that it alone was authorised to expound under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Thus, any interpretation that was at variance to the 'official' view of the Catholic Church was judged to be heretical.125 Because this new pejorative sense became the accepted understanding of the term 'heresy', the term came to be understood as any an opinion that was contrary to the accepted beliefs of the Catholic Church, 126 and 'heretic' as 'a person who dissents from established Church dogma'.127

The attitude of hostility to heresy is evident in St Thomas Aquinas's definition of the term where he defines heresy as 'a species of infidelity in men who, having professed the faith of Christ, corrupt its dogmas'.128 Thomas had little time for those who rejected the teachings of the Church. Quoting from St Jerome (Gal. 5:9) he says the Church should '[c]ut off the decayed flesh, expel the mangy sheep from the fold, lest the whole house, the whole paste, the whole body, the whole flock, burn perish, rot, die'.129 According to Thomas there are two ways that

129 Aquinas: ibid.
Christians can commit heresy: the first is to refuse to believe in Christ Himself, which is the way committed by Jews and pagans; the second is to behave, as we say today, as an ‘a la carte’ Christian. That is, to restrict belief to those points of Christian doctrine that suits one’s own pleasure or caprice.¹³⁰ Whilst the doctrine of papal infallibility was not defined as dogma by the Roman Catholic Church until 1870 as early as the thirteenth century Thomas argued that anyone who denied the authority of the pope should be regarded as a heretic. In what could be construed as a veiled reference to Arius (of whom we shall hear more later in this chapter), Thomas says that while ‘certain doctors’ may differ on matters of faith which have not been defined by the Church, ‘if anyone were obstinately to deny them after they had been defined by the authority of the universal Church, he would be deemed a heretic’.¹³¹ ‘This authority’, he goes on to say, ‘resides chiefly in the Sovereign Pontiff’.¹³² It should be mentioned that there is a difference between heresy and apostasy. A heretic can reject the teachings of the Church while retaining faith in Christ. The apostate a fide abandons Christianity for another religion: Judaism, Islamism, Paganism, or may even abandon religion altogether. According to Thomas, the committed Christian accepts Christ as his or her saviour and the pope as His representative on earth. Thus, to reject the authority of the Pope, or the authority that the Pope invests in his servants, is to commit the act of heresy.

The idea to establish a special instrument to seek out and repress anarchy emerged at the second Lateran Council in 1139. In response to the increasing spread of Catharsist Machaeism, it was

¹³⁰ see ibid.
¹³¹ ibid. II: II. 3.
¹³² ibid.
proposed that the Church should hand over wrong-doers to the secular arm. At the third Lateran Council in 1179, this idea gathered momentum, and in 1184 an assembly presided over by Pope Lucius III drew up a constitution detailing the various classes of heretics, laying down the judicial forms to which they were subject, and defining the penalties that would apply in each case to those accused of heresy.\footnote{133}{see Henri Daniel-Rops. Cathedral and Crusade. Trans, by John Warrington. 1963, p. 546. J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd. London \footnote{134}{see Henry Charles Lea. A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages. 1887, p. 200. Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington. London}

The penalties for heresy

As shown above, the Church’s approach to heresy was that it was a cancer that should be immediately excised or treated. As far as the authorities were concerned, heresy was a crime, which, once committed, return to the Church was not permitted unless the offender’s errors had been admitted and then abjured.\footnote{134}{see Henry Charles Lea. A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages. 1887, p. 200. Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington. London} In each diocese, each bishop and each parish priest was obliged to strive to ensure that the faith of their flock was not polluted by unorthodox doctrines or beliefs. Initially, the power to reject heresies operated without special organisation. That is, bishops were free to identify perceived heresies and to deal with them in whichever way they deemed fit. However, if false doctrines gathered momentum and spread to other dioceses, bishops convened councils, provincial, metropolitan, national, or ecumenical, so that they might combine their authority and quell the spread of corruption. While initially the punishment for heresy was excommunication, when Constantine (c. 313 A.D.) appointed himself lay bishop, \textit{episcopus exterus}, and put the secular arm at the service of the Church, the laws against such
transgressions became more severe. Under purely ecclesiastical discipline the only punishment that could be inflicted upon any accused was to be cut adrift from the community. However, under the Christian emperors, rigorous measures were enforced not only against the possessions of those accused with heresy, but also against their persons. From the time of Constantine to Theodosius and Valentinian (313 to 424 A.D.) various penal laws were enacted against heretics as being guilty of offences against the State. In both Theodosian and Justinian codes all intercourse with heretics was forbidden; all offices of profit and dignity in civil administration were withheld; all accused were forbidden to dispose of their own estates by will, or to accept estates bequeathed to them by others. Heretics were denied the right either to give or receive donations, and in many cases they were scourged and sent into exile. They could be imprisoned for life 'or for a shorter period, and of a severity proportionate to the gravity of the crime; the murus strictus, detention in a small, dark cell, was the most dreaded'. In some cases they were even sentenced to death. Those accused of preaching heretical doctrines were prohibited from teaching either publicly or privately; to hold public disputations; to ordain bishops, presbyters, or any other clergy; to hold religious meetings; or to accept any donations for the purpose of building conventicles. Those found studying heretical doctrines, but not yet embracing them, were fined or, if unable to pay, received fifty lashes in public. In the case of heretics who died or were executed without recanting, their estates either passed to Catholic descendants or, where there was no heir, to the Church. The children of heretical parents were denied their patrimony and inheritance unless they returned to the one true faith of the Church, and heretical

136 see Lea. Op.cit. (ibid.)
texts were burned.\textsuperscript{137} No person, after condemnation for heresy could hold office, inherit property, make a will, execute a sale, or give testimony. The residence of anyone found harbouring a heretic was, in the case of it being inhabited by the owner, forfeited to the Church. Where it was rented, the offending tenant was either fined or publicly flogged.\textsuperscript{138}

The burning of heretics became somewhat of a celebration (in Spain it was known as \textit{auto da fé}). According to Lea, in Italy, probably the first execution of heretics by fire occurred at the portal of Santa Maria Maggiore, in Rome, in 1231.\textsuperscript{139} It seems that in Italy, with the advent of Gregory IX to the pontificate in 1227, a firmer approach had been encouraged in the treatment of heretics. Concerned that insufficient attempts were being made to contain the spread of heretical doctrines, Gregory declared that if heretics did not cease their evil ways, ‘the Holy See would find means to coerce them in their perversity’.\textsuperscript{140} Following the example of his legate Goffredo, Cardinal of San Marco, who had enacted a law by which the houses of heretics could be destroyed and offenders condemned to death, as well as the encouragement given to him by Frederic II, who urged that they should both ‘sharpen the spiritual and temporal swords respectively committed to them against heretics and rebels, without wasting effort on sophistry, for if time be spent in disputation nature will succumb to disease’,\textsuperscript{141} Gregory issued ‘severe laws’ to counter the perceived threat posed by heretical doctrines. Suspected heretics were given a period of between fifteen to thirty days to denounce themselves. If they did so within this time,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[137] see Catholic Encyclopedia. Op.cit. (ibid.)
\item[138] see Lea. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 184)
\item[139] see Lea. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 476)
\item[140] ibid., p. 199
\item[141] ibid., p. 200
\end{footnotes}
with the proviso that they furnished the names and information of any other heretics known to
them, and that they served a penance, they were usually received back into the Church. Those
who confessed were reconciled and various penances imposed, such as fasting, prayers,
pilgrimages, or public flogging; those who failed to ‘submit, confess, and abjure’ were turned
over to the secular authorities, and if they refused to renounce their beliefs they were sentenced
to death by fire. The sentences were pronounced on a Sunday, either in a church or public
place. This was known as the *sermo generalis*. A more lenient approach was taken to any
reformer who could name twelve or more transgressors. Whether those named were guilty or not
was not considered an impediment to their being arrested and tried as heretics. In 1252 Innocent
IV’s Bull *Ad extirpanda* authorised ‘preventive torture’ to be used by ecclesiastical tribunals.

Henri Daniel-Rops, informs us that these punishments involved four methods,

of which flogging was the most lenient. The rack was worse; here the victim is attached
to a wooden frame with his legs and arms tied to a jack, the least movement of which will
dislocate his joints. The strappado is a kind of diabolical game in which the accused is
hauled up by a rope to the top of a very high jibbet and then dropped to within a few
inches of the ground. Finally there is the ordeal of burning coal, which requires no
description.
So oppressive became the measures to counteract heresy that ‘it was impossible for any man, no matter how rigid his orthodoxy, to be safe from persecution if he chanced to provoke the ill-will of the officials’. As a consequence, people were reduced to living in a state of sustained dread conducive to manipulation and control: a panopticon society in which everyone, willingly or unwillingly, became an agent of the authorities. During the Council of the Church in Rome (1512-1517 A.D.), it was not only decided that acts of heresy should continue to be suppressed, but ‘that the printing of all unsound books should be stopped’.

The Roman Inquisition and the Index of Prohibited Books

According to Giambattista Vico the history of the gentiles, unlike the history of the Hebrews, is not a process in which each phase succeeds the other in a gradual but ever-improving march towards the ideal, but a cyclical process consisting of three ages: the age of gods, the age of heroes, and the age of men, which, upon reaching its zenith, eventually dissolves in chaos before returning once again to its original state. Vico explains the anomaly of two histories by maintaining that, since the Hebrews’ origins dated back to Adam, their history was not subject to the same process as the pagans. He also says that while the truths of the Hebrews were given by God in revelation, the truths of the pagan peoples were creations of their own imaginations. However, since Vico’s references to the history of the Hebrews are scant, and it is clear that his ‘ideal eternal history of humankind’ (‘storia ideale eterna’) predominantly concerns the history of gentile nations, the charge can be made that his insistence that there are two histories of

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146 ibid.

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humankind has as much do with his concern for avoiding accusations of heresy as it has to do with historical accuracy.

To understand why Vico chose to present his ‘new science’ in a way that would prevent accusations of heresy, a charge, as shown above, that had been made at some cost against some of his friends and contemporaries, it is necessary that our knowledge of heresy should be extended to include also an awareness of the power that the Roman Inquisition, also known as the Holy Office, and the Index of Prohibited Books wielded leading up to and around Vico’s time. The role of the Inquisition and the Index, was to repress certain views and behaviours. The term ‘Inquisition’, which derives from the Latin term inquiro (inquire into), draws attention to the fact that those appointed to identify transgressors did not wait for heretics to be revealed to them, but actively sought out offenders and infidels. The Roman Inquisition, established by Pope Paul III in 1542, was an imitation of the medieval Inquisition in force in Spain. It was initially set up to combat Protestantism, and although governed by six cardinals, it was completely independent and much freer from Episcopal control than the earlier medieval Inquisition had been.

The origin of the Church’s legislation on prohibited literature is not certain. However, books were a source of concern as early as the scriptural account of the burning of superstitious books at Ephesus by new converts of St Paul (Acts 19: 19). The decree of Pope Gelasius (c. 496), which contained lists of recommended as well as banned books is deemed to be the first Roman
Although the Index of Prohibited Books itself had been introduced by Rodrigo Borgia (1456-1503), who, as Pope Alexander VI, wanted to introduce a system of censure more tolerant than that of the Inquisition, any text that appeared on the list of prohibited books still signalled ruin for its author. In 1559, Pope Paul IV published his own definitively authoritative Index, the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. On it appeared not only heretical texts, but also those which the Inquisition considered immoral. Amongst these works were works by Hermeticists such as Cornelius Agrippa, and by humanists such as Erasmus. All works by Martin Luther were banned, as were those of Jan Hus, the Bohemian ecclesiastical reformer who was excommunicated in 1411 and burned at the stake in 1415. Books on magic, alchemy and astrology also appeared on the list, as did the Judaic Talmud and thirty translations of the Bible in its entirety and eleven of the New Testament. For those whose works came to the attention of either the Inquisition or the Index, it was clearly better to be investigated by the Index rather than the Inquisition. That is, it was considered preferable to have one’s books banned rather than to suffer the fate of people like Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) or Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). Notwithstanding the fact that Galileo, in his *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina* (1615), had argued that science and theology should not be confused, the Inquisition, having examined his *Dialogue concerning the two chief world systems*, in which he asserts that the earth is not the centre of the universe, forced him to ‘abjure, curse, and abhor’ the opinions expressed in his book. However, even this act did not save him, for in 1634 he was arrested by the Inquisition and the work containing his heliocentric theory was placed on the
Index of Prohibited Books. Campanella paid for his scheme for the moral redemption of mankind in his City of the Sun with twenty-seven years incarceration in Saint Elmo Castle. Although released in 1634 after feigning madness,\textsuperscript{153} he soon came under threat again and fled to France. Bruno of Naples, who, in his De la Causa and The Expulsion of the ‘Triumphant Beast’, wrote of an infinite universe which left no room for that greater infinite conception which is called God, that God and nature could not be separate and distinct entities as taught by Genesis, and that the mysteries of the virginity of Mary, of the crucifixion and the mass, were meaningless, was burned at the stake in Campo de’ Fiori in Rome by the Inquisition on February 17\textsuperscript{th}, 1600.\textsuperscript{154} In the fear that his continuing defiance would prove embarrassing to his executioners and disturbing for the spectators, Bruno was afforded the extra indignity of going to his death bound and gagged. In the light of such reprisals it is not surprising that independent philosophical or religious speculation became virtually extinct.

During Vico’s time, in Italy, education was completely in the hands of the Catholic Church, hence, ‘philosophy was only taught in its scholastic forms, and from books that received ecclesiastical approbation. A philosophy which assumed an anti-religious or anti-churchly attitude would not have been tolerated’.\textsuperscript{155} For example, Pietro Giannone’s Civil History of the Kingdom of Naples was quickly placed on the Index after its publication in 1723 for containing

\textsuperscript{152} see Chamberlain. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 149)
\textsuperscript{154} see ibid.
\textsuperscript{155} ibid.
an attack on the power of the papacy. French Protestant Thomas Bayle's journal, *News of the Republic of Letters* was put on the Index in 1689 on the grounds that his argument for the toleration of all views, 'heretical, non-Christian and even atheist ones' should be tolerated; several of Nicolas Malebranche's were also added; Spinoza's *Ethics*, which was first published in his *Opus posthuma* was added in 1670; Hobbes' *Leviathan* joined the list in 1703, and Pietro Giannone's polemic against the power of Rome in his *Civil History of the Kingdom of Naples*, in 1723, was almost immediately placed on the Index. Against such a background, it seems fair to argue that there is a case to be made that Vico, who, as a youth was attracted to the Epicurean philosophy of the Roman Philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus, was a 'closet heretic' who chose to present his new science, as Peter Burke suggests, in a way that would 'avoid, if possible affording occasion or pretext for accusation of heresy'.

**Vico and 'Divine Providence'*

In the *New Science*, Vico's approach to religion is, to say the least, enigmatic. That is, throughout the *New Science*, he appears to find no conflict between Hebrews/Christian religion and the religion of gentiles or pagans as he juxtaposes orthodoxy with heterodoxy. Because of this apparent anomaly, and also because he openly criticises others for superimposing their own prejudices on the past while confidently asserting that Judaism and, as a consequence, Christianity are the only true religions, many commentators have taken the view expressed by Samuel Beckett that when Vico speaks of '[t]his force he called Divine Providence [it is] with

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156 see Miller. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 69)
his tongue, one feels, very much in his cheek'.  

It can be said that Beckett might well have added that when Vico speaks of the history of the Hebrews and Christians his tongue is also not where it should be. For, as Frederick Vaughan says, '[i]t becomes clear from an analysis of Vico’s divine providence that it is not the divine providence of Thomas Aquinas or orthodox Christian theology'.  

While a parallel might be seen in the orthodox Christian view of providence that affirms that the universe and man’s role in it are not subject to the blind forces of fate and chance, and Vico’s view which affirms that his science would be a 

... rational civil theology of divine providence, which was previously lacking in philosophy. For the philosophers were completely unaware of the existence of providence. The Epicureans said that human affairs are set in motion by the blind collision of atoms; and the Stoics said they are drawn along by an inexorable chain of causes and effects

... una teologica civile ragionata dellaprovvedenza divina. La quale sembra aver mancato finora, perché i filosofi o l’hanno sconosciuta affatto, come gli stoici e gli epicure, de’ quali questi dicono che un oncorso cieco d’atomi agita, quelli che una sorda catena di gagioni e d’effetti trascina le faccende degli uomini161

161 Vico. NS. para, 342.
the fact which remains wholly absent from Vico's notion of providence is the concept of an ultimate end or *eschaton*. As Vaughan explains,

>[f]or Augustine and Aquinas, history has a meaning or intelligibly only in terms of providence and a final *telos*. The ultimate end, *finis ultimus*, of man is God, i.e., a transcendent end which gives meaning to history. There is no such end in Vico’s theory of providential history.\(^{162}\)

According to Vico the truths upon which the history of the Hebrews was founded was given by the one true God in revelation, whereas the ‘truths’ upon which the histories of pagans nations were founded arose in virtue of the *sensus communis* to meet the needs or utilities of society at particular times and places in the ever unfolding and refolding ideal eternal history of humankind, under the governance of divine providence – a silent force which, in many cases, acted contrary to the wishes of men.\(^{163}\) Evidence that Vico uses his skill as a master of rhetoric to deflect the attention of the authorities from the fact that his concept of the dynamic which drives the history of humankind was at variance with Church teaching can be found in his declaration that he believed his own life represented the ideal eternal in microcosm and that from his earliest days providence had been unwilling to establish him ‘in comfortable circumstances and cut off all means to improve his condition’.\(^{164}\) He also attributed his failure to achieve his long cherished ambition to win the chair of jurisprudence at the University of Naples to the same

\(^{162}\) Vaughan. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 43)
\(^{163}\) Vico. NS, para, 342.
silent force when he concluded that in its wisdom providence had liberated him from the shackles of academia so that he might accomplish his real purpose in life which was to develop the ideas already set out in his orations.

Vico held that the evidence he provides to support his thesis of a ‘providentially driven’ revolving historical process set out in his new science was so convincing that ‘... no matter what one’s theological presuppositions might be, his science would have the same utility’. As Vico himself puts it,

...the predominant proofs of my science follow this form: given the orders established by divine providence, human institutions had to, have to, and will have to develop in the way described in my science. (Nor would this change even if infinite worlds were to arise from time to time throughout eternity, which is certainly false in fact).

... quindi regna in questa Scienza questa specie di pruove: che tali dovettero, debbono e dovranno andare le cose delle nazioni quali da questa Scienza son ragionate, posti tali ordini dalla provvidenza divina, fusse anco che dall’ eternità nascessero di tempo in tempo mondi infiniti; lo che certamente è falso di fato.

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166 Vico. NS, para, 358
Vico goes on to say that his new science traces the course of history through which every nation must pass in time.\textsuperscript{167} If it is, as Vico says, that every nation must pass through this historical process, the implication is that his inclusion of a second history - the history of the Hebrews - is a sophisticated device designed to keep him out of the gaze of the Inquisition, and his work out of the clutches of the Index.

In the \textit{New Science}, then, Vico acknowledges that an unseen force drives the dynamic of human evolution, or in his case human revolution. In order to explain this force in an historico-cultural context, Vico calls it ‘divine providence’. However, he qualifies this by saying that the term ‘divinari’ is taken from the Latin and means to ‘foretell the future’. Thus, as Cecelia Miller says, for Vico, divine providence is a force ‘... not unlike the secular version presented by Hegel as “cunning reason” and Adam Smith as the “invisible”’.\textsuperscript{168} In his autobiography, Vico hints at the cultural constraints on him as a scholar and on the language he must use to present his philosophical paradigm where he says that he thinks the way he does because he was born in Naples and not Morocco.\textsuperscript{169} In a climate in which praise from the Protestant editor of the \textit{Biblioteque anciene et moderne}, Jean le Clerc, for Vico’s \textit{Universal Law} was calculated to be harmful to his reputation, it should come as no surprise that he should choose to present his \textit{magnum opus} in a manner that would not expose him to the charge of heresy.

\textsuperscript{167} ibid., para, 359
\textsuperscript{168} Miller. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 103)
\textsuperscript{169} ibid., p. 104
Vico and Religion

Explicit in Vico’s *New Science* is the view that even in a non-Judaic or non-Christian world his science would carry the same effect. Isaac la Peyrère (1594-1675), a Calvanist of Bordeaux, in his Latin treatise, *Systema Theologicum ex Praeadamitarum hypothesi*, (Adam’s Predecessors) (1655), had already proposed the concept of such a world when he said:

> It is a natural suspition that the beginning of the world is not to be received according to that common beginning which is pictured as Adam influent in all men who have but an ordinary knowledge of things. For what beginning seems enquirable at a far greater distance and from ages past very long before, both by ancient accounts of the Chaldeans and also by the most ancient records of the Egyptians, Aethiopians and Scythians, and by parts of the frame of the world newly discovered, as also from those unknown countries to which Hollanders have sayled of late, the men of which it is probable did not descend from Adam. I had this suspition being a child when I heard or read the history of Genesis.\(^{170}\)

It seems that La Peyrère, like Vico, also held that there were two histories: that of humanity, and that of the Hebrews. He held too that Adam was not the founder of the human race, but only the

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first Hebrew and that Noah’s Flood was local rather than global.\textsuperscript{171} Harold Stone draws attention to the fact that although Vico, when discussing La Peyrère’s hypothesis, dismissed his pre-Adamite view, he does go on to say that the Jews are descended from Adam\textsuperscript{172} - a role, Stone reminds us, that had been traditionally assigned to Abraham.\textsuperscript{173} Since these arguments caused consternation in Christian Europe it comes as no surprise that the ever prudent Vico was keen to distance himself from the French thinker’s views. Although this may not be evidence that Vico was a ‘clandestine believer in the pre-Adamites’, says Stone, ‘[i]n keeping with the general direction of his thought, a better description might be that even in the possible world of pre-Adamites his theory of nations would hold’.\textsuperscript{174} While this may well have been the case, given that the belief in men before Adam was one of the heresies of which some of Vico’s friends were accused in 1691,\textsuperscript{175} and also given, notwithstanding his rejection of La Peyrère’s pre-Adamite hypothesis, that Vico holds that his science would apply even in such a world, it may be that one has to look beyond the lines of \textit{Scienza Nuova}: to events that were happening in Naples at that time, to discover Vico’s real position on this issue.

By setting up a dialectic between orthodox religion and paganism, Vico sets about a subtle but potentially dangerous deconstruction of orthodox religion. For example, in his \textit{New Science}, he defines the true God as ‘eternal order’.\textsuperscript{176} He goes on to says that ‘[w]ithout order, which is to

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{171}] Stone. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 300)
\item[\textsuperscript{172}] see Vico. NS para, 51
\item[\textsuperscript{173}] Stone. Op.cit. (ibid., p.303)
\item[\textsuperscript{174}] ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{175}] see Burke. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 66)
\item[\textsuperscript{176}] see ibid., para, 590
\end{itemize}
say without God, human society cannot endure for even a moment'. But the notion of societal order, for Vico, develops from people’s fear that unless they suppress passions and live virtuous lives that the god Jove will punish them. Therefore the god of order is a concept made by man. Vico cannot say this, of course, lest he suffer the fate of being punished by the ‘divine’ heroes of his own society. Vico continues his mindgame by stating that poetic wisdom, which is the wisdom of pagans, began when pagan metaphysicians, or theological poets, began to contemplate God in his attribute of divine providence. However, even in the same paragraph he explains that this God is a ‘divine archetype or imagined universal’ (‘carattere divino, ovvero un universale fantastico’). Vico’s own view of God is unambiguously articulated where he says, ‘my New Science envisions a natural theogony. This means a genealogy of gods as it naturally formed in the imagination...’ (‘meditiamo in quest’opera una teogonia naturale, o sia generazione degli dèi, fatta naturalmente nelle fantasie...’).

The question that arises for the Vichean commentator is ‘how can one whose “new science” rejects the notion of absolute, timeless values assert so adamantly the doctrine of Christianity’? Perhaps, as Isaiah Berlin says, this is Vico’s way of ‘avoiding the Epicurean-evolutionist heresy for which the Inquisition, in the last years of the seventeenth century, had inflicted terrible punishment on some of his Neapolitan friends and contemporaries’. Indeed, Max Fisch adds weight to this view when he makes the point that Vico’s ‘writings are not fully intelligible to one

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177 ibid., para 1100
178 see ibid., para, 502
179 see ibid., para 381
180 ibid.
181 Vico. NS, para, 69

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who does not bear in mind that it [the Inquisition] was active in Naples throughout his [Vico’s] lifetime'. Jules Michelet also displays some sympathy with this approach when he says ‘Vico shows how gods are made and unmade... [i]t is man who makes [them]. He constantly creates himself; he manufactures his earth and his heaven. Thus is the mystery revealed. The revelation so bold that Vico is himself afraid of it'. Michelet goes on to say that Vico ‘makes an amazing effort to believe that he is still a believer’. What should in fact be said that Vico, as professor of rhetoric at University of Naples, ‘makes an amazing effort to show others that he is still a believer’.

As already said, all human civilisations, says Vico, pass through a cycle of three ages: the age of religion: the age of heroes, and the age of men. The nature of those of the first age is creative or poetic: it is a nature ‘produced by the powerful illusions of the imagination’, (‘per forte inganno di fantasia’) at a time when the reasoning powers of men are weakest and the power of fantasy strongest. The nature of those of the second age is heroic. It is an age when the most influential amongst the community are elevated to the status of leader. It is also an age during which these leaders see themselves, as natural ‘sons of Jupiter, under whose auspices they had been begotten’ (‘figiliuoli di Giove, siccome quelli ch’erano stati generati con gli auspici di

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185 ibid.
186 ibid., para, 916
187 see ibid.

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Giove),\textsuperscript{188} to be divine. The third age: the age of men, is the age of democracy. It is during this age, when the nature of men becomes corrupt, ‘as did the plebeian tribunes at Rome’ (‘*come i tribuni della plebe nella romana’*),\textsuperscript{189} that providence provides one of three remedies: (i) the emergence of a leader, ‘like Augustus, who rises up and establishes himself as their monarch’ (‘*come Augusto, vi surga e vi si stabilisca monarca*’),\textsuperscript{190} (ii) the overpowering of the corrupt societies by ‘superior nations which conquer them by arms’ (‘*nazione migliori, che l’abbiano conquistate con l’armi*’),\textsuperscript{191} or (iii) by causing ‘obstinate factional strife and desperate civil wars to turn their cities into forests and their forests into lairs’ (‘*ostinatissime fazioni e disperate guerre civili, vadano a fare selve della città, e delle selve covili d’uomini*’).\textsuperscript{192} In other words, at a particular time in the ever revolving history of human kind, providence ordains that certain conditions must arise through which humankind can return ‘to the primitive simplicity of the early world of peoples’ (‘*primiera semplicità del primo mondo de’ popoli*’).\textsuperscript{193} Indeed, Tom Holland, in his book *Rubicon: The Triumph and Tragedy of the Roman Republic*, informs us that among those who claimed divine origins was Gaius Julius Caesar, who held that his family line ‘all the way back to Aeneas, a prince of the Trojan royal house, who in turn had been the grandson of Venus’.\textsuperscript{194} It seems too that Alexander the Great, following a visit to the oracle of Zeus Ammon at Siva in the Libyan desert, came to the conclusion that ‘he was the actual son of

\textsuperscript{188}ibid., para, 917
\textsuperscript{189}ibid., para, 1102
\textsuperscript{190}ibid., para, 1104
\textsuperscript{191}ibid., para, 1105
\textsuperscript{192}ibid., para, 1106
\textsuperscript{193}ibid.
Zeus', and in Egypt, the Ptolemies, to whom Cleopatra belonged, widely claimed to be relations of the gods.195

Having set the scene in which parallels could be drawn between Christ and such leaders as Augustus, Vico was quick to ensure that his 'new science' could not be held open to the charges made against Arianism - a movement that held that since the Son of God was created by God the Father, his nature could not be the same as that of the Creator.196 The issue of the true nature of Christ was formally settled at the First Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council held by the Church. This council was convened by the Roman Emperor Constantine in 325 AD in an attempt to end the controversy raised by Arius, an Alexandrian priest, concerning the nature of the Trinity. It seems that Arius was indicted because he had specifically condemned the use of the homousios, which means of the same substance, to describe the relationship between Jesus and God.197 During earlier times this issue had not raised too much antagonism, the term, however, in the fourth century most Christian theologians rejected the Arian stance.198 By a substantial majority the decision of the council was that God the Father and God the Son were consubstantial and coeternal and that the Arian belief was heretical. As a consequence of the council's finding Arius was branded an infidel and excommunicated. In his New Science, Vico draws attention to the fate of Arius where he describes how Christianity was saved from Arianism when 'Christian Kings everywhere, like heroic priests... founded military religious orders... [and] re-established the Catholic religion in their realms against the Arians' ('gli re

197 see Christopher Stead. Philosophy in Christian Antiquity. 1994, p. 169. Cambridge
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Although, at first sight, this passage appears to support and defend the decision of the Council of Nicaea and the action of the Christian kings against infidels, further attention to the detail of a campaign that was marked by ‘violence, robbery, and murder, (‘le violenze, le rapine, l’uccisioni’) infers that measures taken by the ‘Sagra Real Maesta’ against those who dared to advance alternate views were extreme. As far as it was possible, Vico would endeavour to ensure that similar measures would not be taken against him.

Giambattista Vico: from humanism to postmodernism

In all situations in which people are oppressed there arises a counter movement which opposes this state of oppression. This movement is recognised in Vico's *New Science* as an historic reality where he puts forward the thesis that in all societies, there occurs a struggle between two opposing forces. During periods where society is clearly divided between masters and slaves: patriarchs and plebeians, this struggle results in a situation where each party gives ground to the other, thus resulting in a more equitable state of affairs. While there is no direct evidence that the Hegelian dialectic draws on Vico’s philosophy, there is evidence that Karl Marx drew on the work of both Hegel and Vico in the construction of his philosophical thesis. As a young man in Germany, Marx, having grappled with Hegel’s philosophy, adapted it to suit his own developing
ideas. However, this reformulation not only shows the influence of the German philosopher, but also of aspects of Vico’s *New Science*. That Marx was familiar with the work of the Italian philosopher is indubitable, for in a letter to Ferdinand Lassalle Karl Marx writes: ‘It surprises me that you seem not to have read Vico’s *New Science*... [it] contains... a great deal else that is original.’\(^{204}\) Lest one should think that this evidence is too flimsy, Max Fisch, in his introduction to Vico’s autobiography, reminds us that ‘Marx... seem[s] to have taken from Vico... the formula that “men make their own history”, from which their own historical materialism was developed.’\(^{205}\) Like Vico and Hegel, Marx seeks to establish the fact that human history unfolds in accordance with a dialectic process. For Hegel, this unfolding results, over time, in the self-realisation of the individual and the Self-realisation of the Absolute Mind. For Marx, this dialect leads to a perfect socialist state. For Vico, the human historical process holds no such utopian promises. In an argument that anticipates the postmodern perspective on human history Vico says that all societal states or conditions are constantly changing. As Sandra Rudnick Luft says, to see Marx’s philosophy of history as ‘the end of a process begun by Vico’ is to fail to recognise ‘Vico’s role, intentionally or not, in a philosophy not formulated until long after his death.’\(^{206}\) While it can be argued that Vico’s model, since it follows a particular process from birth, growth, maturity, and demise, is more structuralist than postmodern, this thesis shows that the central theme of Vico’s thesis is that nothing is given; reason inevitably leads to social fragmentation,

\(^{203}\) see ibid.
\(^{205}\) Fisch and Bergin. Op.cit. (p. 105)
and that the civil world: all laws, values, truths and beliefs, are all creations of the human imagination.

Should Vico’s view that individual consciousness is fashioned by social forces be sustainable, one could be forgiven for concluding that his philosophy would reflect only those views sanctioned by the Church, or by the society of his times. However, by way of endorsing the theory of the dialectic process as an historical reality, as a reaction to the dominance of religion on philosophy during the Middle Ages, there arose, in Italy, a contrapuntal movement which replaced divine authority with human authority. Not surprisingly this movement became known as ‘humanism’. Humanism held that the medieval scholastic syllabus was too abstract and dogmatic and that it had lost sight of concrete human experience in a desire to establish universal, eternal, and transcendental truths. Although humanism was not a coherent system of belief, as its title suggests, it was an anthropocentric rather than theocentric movement that centred on humankind rather than God. And although many humanists saw the time of the ancient Greeks as the Golden Age of human civilisation, others took their understanding of ancient civilisation from Lucretius who, in his poem On the Nature of Things, not only attacks religion as superstition but also emphasises the importance of the body, without which the mind and the soul could not survive; more importantly, he provides a pre-Darwinian account of human evolution from animals. Amongst those who entertained ‘Lucretian’ ideas were Machiavelli, papal secretary and bibliophile Poggio Bracciolini, the Florentine Alessandra Scala, the artist

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207 sec Anne Markey: ‘How important is Humanism in Understanding the Literature of the Renaissance?’: 2000, p. 3. Dublin City University. Dublin
Piero di Cosimo, whose paintings ‘make man much closer to animals than the Christian account of their creation in *Genesis* suggests’, and, as already shown, Giambattista Vico.

Central to humanism was the refusal to accept that humankind is completely subject to divine will, but had the ability to shape and control its own destiny. Humanists saw the self as flexible, problematic, and elusive and their insistence on the need for the construction of a public self meant that individual identity was not innate or essential but fashioned through a series of encounters with the wider community. Because of its focus on humankind rather than God, humanism was a secular philosophy which concentrated on the development of human potential for worldly life rather than on preparation for a life of the soul after the demise of the body. Although most early humanists, including Francesco Petrarch (1304-740), displayed some allegiance to Christianity, towards the end of the fifteenth century and beginning of the sixteenth century many came to treat Christianity as an obsolete system, and drifted towards more ‘heretical’ or pagan values. Thus, whilst Christianity remained fundamental to the lives of ordinary people’s lives, both spiritually and socially, for humanists, the view that ‘man is the measure of all things’ together with an ‘uncertainty about whether the gods exist or not’, and the absence of a universal standard of morality, generated a culture in which groups came together to discuss philosophical issues and questions from a non theological perspective in a more open and progressive atmosphere. However, this openness to innovative and progressive ideas was not shared by the Church authorities and even as late as the eighteenth century people

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209 ibid., p. 100
210 see Markey. *Op.cit.* (ibid.)
paid dearly for their involvement in these discussions. Not surprisingly, in a climate that punished anyone who dared to display a new independence of thought, Vico needed to find a model which would allow him to discuss such issues with impunity. As shown above, he found such a model for his critique in the work of Isaac La Peyrère. To argue, as La Peyrère had done, that there was a separate history for Hebrews and Christians allowed Vico to discuss his ‘heretical’ or ‘postmodern’ approach without fear of Episcopal reprisal.

Conclusion
In virtue of his unorthodox background Vico became an unorthodox thinker - so unorthodox that there are grounds for believing that Vico was a closet heretic. But if Vico was a heretic he was a wise and a prudent one. He would have known, for example, as far as the Inquisition was concerned, that the only good heretic was a dead one; and he would have realised that if he wanted to keep himself healthy and his work publishable, he would have to present his ‘postmodern’ discoveries in a way that would offend neither the Inquisition nor the Index, but would, to a disciple of his ‘new scientific’ method, contain clues that would reveal his true meaning. In short, while Vico privately entertained heretical notions, publicly he would have to have been seen to be a pillar of the Christian community. It must be said, he did it with considerable aplomb, for he died peacefully in his bed at seventy-six years of age.

212 ibid.
Chapter 3. From Modern to Postmodern: The Search for a Method

Introduction

According to Giambattista Vico, his new science employs an innovative approach to decoding ancient history, mythology, and law. By the use of this new scientific method, his 'nuova arte critica', Vico believes he can demonstrate that the Greek myths are actually rigorous histories of the customs of the most ancient peoples of Greece' ('severe istorie de 'costumi delle antichissime genti di Grecia'). However, whilst Vico's claim that he introduces a new or innovative approach to philosophy may be justifiable, in keeping with the thesis that his preparedness to borrow from the work of others, and his rejection of the modern view that ideas arise in some solipsist vacuum, sets him beyond the modern mindset, this chapter sets out to detail some of the developments in science leading up to the 'discovery' of his new scientific method. In doing so, it will consider the role of invention of the printing press in the resurgence of interest in science during the Renaissance period, and it will trace the transition from the scientific approach of Copernicus to the modern approach of Descartes, and to the postmodern approach of Vico.

The influence of printing on the rise of science

As shown in the previous chapter, during the Middle Ages any form of radical thought judged to contravene the parameters set by the Church authorities was actively, and often brutally, discouraged. Philosophy was not the only discipline to find its endeavours constrained by the measures employed by the Inquisition and the Index of Prohibited Books, but also were science
and astronomy. It was not until the sixteenth century that certain Renaissance thinkers, such as Copernicus, presented findings that set in train a renewal of interest in science. The scientific revolution, then, followed a natural progression from Renaissance humanism and was fuelled by the perceived successes of scientific methodology. However, it can be argued that this rise of interest would not have taken place at this time had it not been for the invention of the printing press almost a century earlier. The person most credited with the introduction of the printing machine is Johan Gutenberg who, in 1454, published the Gutenberg Bible, the first book printed by a machine using moveable type. The first fifty years of moveable type is called the ‘Incunabula period’. The term ‘incunabula’, which derives from the Latin term cuneus, means ‘cradle’ or ‘beginning’ well reflects the changes that were occurring during this period of history. The printing press was a marked improvement on the medieval practice of hand-copying. Before the introduction of this technology, scribes, who were mostly monks, had to copy texts by hand. The process of printing spread throughout Europe, and was used extensively in Italy, where humanist writers of the Renaissance had long sought a way to communicate their ideas to the public. Although it cannot be said that printing itself was not responsible for the formulation of new ideas, it did allow revolutionary ideas to circulate more quickly and with greater accuracy than before.

In the opening chapter of this thesis, ‘Vico’s Sources’, the benefits Vico gained from the spread of knowledge contained in a wide and varied assortment of texts is discussed. In his book, On
Vico, acknowledges the contribution the introduction of the printing press made to this spread of knowledge when he says,

The invention of the printing places at our disposal an enormous number of books. Hence, our scholars are not compelled to restrict their competence to the knowledge of one or another author, but can master a multiple, diversified, almost boundless domain of culture.\textsuperscript{217}

\textit{Grazie alla stampa, dappertutto si pubblicano libri, per cui presso i nostri sono tanti non solamente coloro che hanno familiarità con uno o due autori, ma anche quelli che si sono eruditi attraverso una cultura vasta, varia e quasi infinita.}\textsuperscript{218}

This remark not only endorses Vico’s view that one should never align oneself to any single worldview, it also critiques any system that attempts to limit or constrain the freedom or independence of thought.

By providing people with the possibility of purchasing texts, previously only available to clergy and nobles, at affordable prices, and in the privacy of their homes, printing played an important role in the reinvigoration of interest in science and astronomy. After the Bible, the earliest works to be printed were those of St. Augustine: a complete edition of his \textit{City of God} was published at

\textsuperscript{216} see ibid.
Subiaco in Italy in 1476.\footnote{see Freeman. Op.cit. (ibid. p. 278)} Amongst the earliest radical texts to be circulated in early modern society was Nikolas Copernicus' *De revolutionibus*. While Copernicus did not live to appreciate the influence his *opus* had on other thinkers, Alison Brown informs us that it is known that it was purchased by many leading astronomy professors in the sixteenth century and later by Galileo Galilei, Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler.\footnote{see Brown. Op.cit. (ibid., p.88)}

**Nikolas Copernicus (1473–1543) and Tycho Brahe (1546-1601)**

During the Middle Ages the Catholic Church incorporated the Ptolemaic system into the Christian view of the world as part of a programme to combine the wisdom of the ancients with Christian religion.\footnote{see Bryan Magee: *The Story of Philosophy*. 1998, p. 64. Dorling Kindersley. London.} This worldview held that the Earth was the centre of the universe and that heavenly bodies travelled in their orbits around it. God, who was the creator of all things, ruled from a realm above the heavenly bodies. In order to accommodate actual observations with the theoretical movements, Ptolemy devised a geometric model of concentric circles and epicycles. During the later Middle Ages, as observations became more accurate, ‘more and more epicycles were added until the model became intensely complicated while still not achieving the level of accuracy it required’.\footnote{H.G. Koenisberger, *H.G. Early Modern Europe 1500-1789*. 1987. p. 229. Longman. London and New York} In 1543, the publication of a work by the Polish astronomer Nikolas Copernicus offered an alternative approach which was not only revolutionary but also had the merit of being less complicated than the Ptolmaic system. In this work, *De revlountionibus orbium caelestrum*, (On the Revolution of Celestial Spheres), Copernicus posited the view that it...
was not the case that the sun orbited the earth, but that the sun was the heavenly body around which all other celestial bodies revolved. With this heliocentric view, he argued, the planetary movements that had become increasingly difficult to understand under the Ptolemaic system, would be resolved. Notwithstanding the fact that his 'heliocentric ideas coincided with the common astrological habit of using the sun as a symbol of unity [and that]... he proved the hypothesis by detailed experiments and measurements' it was felt that Copernicus' geocentric worldview was not fully developed, and his revolutionary approach was rejected by other astronomers at that time. However, in 1572, interest was restored when the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe discovered a new star which was found to have no daily parallax. That is, because it did not exhibit an apparent difference in position when viewed on a daily basis over a period of time, it must be at a greater distance from the earth than the moon. However, whilst he now held the planets orbited the sun, he still held that the sun orbited the earth. As Bertrand Russell points out, '[t]he importance of Tycho Brahe was not as a theorist, but as an observer... He made a star catalogue and noted the positions of the planets throughout many years'. Whilst later developments would reveal shortcomings in both Copernicus' and Brahe's discoveries, their contribution to the development of a scientific method is significant in that it shows that scientific progress depends on the systematic and patient collection and testing of facts. Not surprisingly this approach was taken up by Brahe's assistant, Johannes Kepler, to whom he bequeathed all of his material.

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223 see ibid.
226 ibid., p. 515
227 see Magee. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 66)
Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), and Isaac Newton (1642-1727)

After Copernicus, the German mathematician and astronomer Johannes Kepler was the first scientist of note to entertain a heliocentric worldview. Following Brahe’s methodical approach, Kepler’s comprehensive observations revealed that, rather than moving in orbits that were circular and uniform, planets move in elliptical orbits. Kepler’s observations also revealed that the speed of a planet is at its greatest when closest to the sun, and that the further a planet’s orbit is from the sun the slower it moves. Thus showing that the long held view that all celestial movements must make symmetrical patterns was false.

About the same time as Kepler was making his revelations, the Dutch optician Hans Lippersley was announcing the invention of the telescope. In April 1610, Galileo Galilei wrote in the *Starry Messenger (Sidereus Nuncius)* that based on reports he had received of this invention a year earlier, he had set about investigating means by which he might design a similar instrument. By the end of the same year Galileo had developed a spyglass powerful enough to study heavenly bodies. By the end of the following year his astronomical observations revealed that the geocentric theory that held that the earth was the centre of the universe was, as Copernicus had hypothesised, seriously flawed. Galileo’s studies revealed that the moon had mountains and valleys similar to those found on earth. They showed that the Milky Way consists of a multitude of stars, and that Jupiter has four moons. Perhaps his most significant discovery was the Law of Inertia. According to this law a body remains in the state it is in, whether at rest or in

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228 see Russell. Op.cit (ibid.)
230 see ibid.
motion, unless acted upon by some other force. Thus, a body would move in a straight line as long as it was not interfered with by an external force. Until this time, one of the main arguments against the view that the earth moved around its own axis was the view that it would move with such velocity that a falling body would land some distance from the point from which it was launched. The law of inertia showed that it not only falls straight down, but that it also falls at exactly the same speed. The discovery of this law was important in that it showed that the Copernican heliocentric hypothesis was supported by scientific evidence. The next major contributor to modern science was Isaac Newton – a thinker who came into this world on the very day that Galileo departed from it.

Isaac Newton was an English physicist and mathematician who brought the work of his predecessors, Kepler and Galileo, to the point where it provided a full and precise view of the planetary system. Kepler had earlier proposed that there must be a force that caused planets to attract one another. That is, that there was something that held the planets fast in their orbits. He also held that the ebb and flow of the tides was a result of a lunar force. Galileo had rejected this theory. Gravitational forces do not work over large distances, he claimed, nor do they work between planetary bodies. In 1687 Newton brought closure to the debate in his *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, or *Principia*, which contained the Law of Universal Gravity. This law states that every object attracts every other object with a force that increases in proportion to the size of the objects, and decreases in proportion to the distance between the

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231 see ibid.
232 see ibid., p. 68
objects. This theory not only explained Galileo’s law that falling bodies fall with constant acceleration, but it also explained Kepler’s theory concerning the motion of planets.\textsuperscript{233} It also allowed Newton to predict the motion of the planets and their satellites, the orbits of the comets, and the ebb and flow of the tides.\textsuperscript{234}

The developments in science by Newton and his predecessors had a profound influence on modern philosophy. In parenthesis, that Vico was familiar with such developments is without doubt, for, even at a time when many Italian philosophers, in fear of political and religious persecution, were forced to study abroad, there existed in Naples certain Cartesian and anti-Cartesian academies which dared to discuss such issues and to which he was aligned. One such was The Academy of the Investigators. Founded by the mathematician Tommaso Cornelio (1614-86) and the physician Leonardo da Capua (1617-93), this academy discussed not only matters concerning mathematics, law, and medicine but also the advances in scientific and cosmological methodology.\textsuperscript{235} It was the reliability of the knowledge that arose from these scientific methods that encouraged the view that all claims to knowledge, natural and supernatural, should be answerable to the same rigorous approach. If the secrets of the physical world could be uncovered by scientific methods, surely similar achievements might accrue from employing a similar approach to things metaphysical. Thus, while René Descartes is credited as the first modern thinker to employ the scientific method to things philosophical, his revolutionary ‘modern’ approach would not have been possible without the advances made in

\textsuperscript{233} see Mautner. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 384)
\textsuperscript{235} see Palmer. Op.cit. (ibid., pp. 7, 32, 86n)
science by such luminaries as Copernicus, Brahe, Kepler, Galileo and Newton. Nor would Giambattista Vico's postmodern approach have been possible had it not been for his recognition of the benefits of such an approach in the works of Francis Bacon and René Descartes.

Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and René Descartes (1596-1650)

While the term 'modern' is a relative one and can be taken to mean any period which exhibits a contrast between the present and the past, it is a term used by historians to describe the air of scepticism that prevailed around the end of the seventeenth century in the wake of the many rebellions in religion, the humanities, and the natural sciences. Modern philosophy originated when certain thinkers sought to devise philosophical systems that would dispel this air of scepticism. In virtue of the perceived successes of science, and in the search for a method that would lead to certain knowledge, these philosophers decided to apply a similar systematic method to their own discipline. Amongst those counted as innovators of this 'modern' approach are René Descartes, who announced that his 'absolutely new science' was 'so certain and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions brought forward by sceptics were incapable of shaking it', and Francis Bacon, who, in his Novum Organum (1620) argued that a proper scientific method should reveal the true nature of things.

Descartes believed that in order to confront the sceptics, a new philosophical method was needed. By employing 'long chains of reasonings... which geometers are accustomed to using

to teach their most difficult demonstrations\textsuperscript{238} ("longues chaînes de raisons... dont les géomètres ont coutume de se servir pour parvenir à leur plus difficiles démonstrations")\textsuperscript{239} Descartes held that he had found a method that was capable of leading to absolute certainty.\textsuperscript{240} This new system involved a four pronged approach. The first was never to accept anything to be true unless it could be shown to be evidently so; the second was to divide complex problems into simple problems; the third involved structuring thought in an orderly manner, and the fourth was to painstakingly document all findings in order to ensure that, on review, nothing could be overlooked or forgotten.\textsuperscript{241} This new method would not only define matter as extension, characterise the mind as pure thought, and solve all problems, scientific and philosophical, but it would provide definitive proof that God was the creator and sustainer of the cosmos.\textsuperscript{242}

Giambattista Vico was initially drawn to Cartesianism. Indeed, in the first of the seven annual inaugural addresses he delivered as professor of rhetoric at Naples University between 1699 and 1708, he explicitly endorsed Descartes' causal proof for the existence of God and used it to explain the power of the human mind.\textsuperscript{243} However, by the time he came to give his second address a year later he had begun to move away from Descartes, and in his third address, a year further on again, he openly criticised him for being intellectually pretentious.\textsuperscript{244} According to Vico the notion that human nature had, since the dawn of mankind, possessed not only reasoning


\textsuperscript{238} Descartes. Op.cit. (ibid., 1968, p. 41)

\textsuperscript{239} Descartes. \textit{Discours de la Méthode}. 2004, p.25 Librio. Paris

\textsuperscript{240} see Sutcliffe. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 16)

\textsuperscript{241} see ibid., p. 41

\textsuperscript{242} see Palmer Op.cit (ibid., p. 4)
faculties, but reasoning faculties detached from the senses, which give access to timeless truths, was a 'conceit of scholars' ('boria de' dotti'). Modern scholars like Descartes had failed to see that states of mind are not fixed. The ancients had not possessed thoughts and feelings like their own. As Isaiah Berlin says, for Vico, human beings did not, like Athena, 'spring fully armed from the head of Zeus', but in the same way that the consciousness of individuals unfolds and develops from infancy to adulthood, so did the consciousness of humankind progress from primitivism to civilisation.

According to Vico, what Descartes and other moderns had failed to see is that they were attempting something that was beyond the power of the human mind. Clear and distinct ideas do not exist in a solipsist vacuum, detached from the senses, rather they are inextricably connected to memory imagination. Unless the reason, imagination, and memory operate in unison, says Vico, we are 'incapable of entering into the imaginative powers of the earliest people' ('niegota di poter entrare nella vasta immaginativa di que' primi uomini'). It is only when these attributes are used in harmony that exponents of Vico's new scientific method can think themselves into the mindset of those of other ages. That is, to empathise with levels of consciousness of the people of earlier times. The importance Vico attaches to the collective development and employment of these faculties is contained in his On the Study Methods of Our

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243 ibid., p. 10
244 see ibid.
Time where he maintains that the modern approach of exposing young minds to philosophical criticism before they have been grounded in the common sense faculties of imagination and memory, is to engender in them a sense of oddity and arrogance that manifests itself in adulthood and leads to an abnormal growth of abstract reasoning.\(^{251}\) Whilst in the young memory is the strongest feature, and in adolescence imagination the more powerful, in maturity it is reason that dominates. Thus, from the very outset, for students of Vico’s *nuova arte critica*, their ‘common sense [should]... be strengthened... [and] their imagination and memory fortified so that they may be effective in those arts in which fantasy and the mnemonic faculty are predominant. At a later stage let them learn criticism\(^{252}\) (‘*senso commune progrediscano... [e]... la fantasia e la memoria si irrobustiscano in quelle arti che si servono di queste facoltà, infine apprendono la critica’).\(^{253}\) It is only when the mind has been cultivated in this way that it can feel its way into the ‘strange textures of past cultures’\(^{254}\) and begin to understand how concepts and ideas of ancients first arose.

Although Vico rejected the view that the mind has innate clear and distinct ideas, he did hold the view that there was some merit in Descartes’ systematic approach. That is, he decided that if he was to conduct a thorough examination and investigation of ancient texts, he too needed to devise a method that allowed the greatest degree of detachment from his own social conditioning. Like Descartes, he felt that it is only when one has a mind so disciplined that one

\(^{250}\) Vico. *NS*, para, 378
\(^{252}\) ibid., p 19.
can remove oneself from all external influences, that one can see things clearly. What was needed, he decided, was a system that would allow him to embark on his ‘scientific’ research. He found such a method by adapting Francis Bacon’s scientific study of natural things to the study of ancient myths.

According to Bacon everything had a simple nature; that is, a form, or essence. To show this he decided to employ the principles of his ‘new scientific’ method to investigate the nature of heat. Using lists made of all the instances in which heat is present, lists in which it is absent, and lists of bodies of varying degrees of heat, Bacon found that, by a process of comparison and elimination, he could expect to arrive at general laws having, in the first instance, the lowest degree of generality. From a number of such laws he hoped to arrive at a set of laws of generality, and so on. For example, in the case of heat, its true nature cannot be weight, since weight is found in both sets of tabulations. Having taken everything into account, Bacon’s conclusion was that the one thing that is constant whenever heat is present, and missing whenever heat is absent, is motion. Ergo, motion is the true nature of heat.

Bacon rejected syllogistic reasoning. Syllogisms, he held,

[were] no match for the subtlety of nature’, they ‘consist of propositions, propositions consist of words, words are symbols of notions. Therefore, if the notions themselves...


*see Russell. Op.cit., ibid., p.528*
are confused and overhastily abstracted from the facts, there can be no firmness in the superstructure. Our only hope lies in true induction.\textsuperscript{257}

Thus, for Bacon, whilst the syllogism was useful in certain cases, it could not be relied upon to identify the real truth of nature. The theories and opinions of rationalist thinkers should be set aside, he argued, and one should begin to observe the facts, record one’s observations, and gather together a body of data on which we can depend. This body of reliable data, Bacon maintained, should not be gathered arbitrarily, but by careful and exact experiment. From this data, certain regularities, patterns, and causal connections should emerge which reveal the laws of nature in particular circumstances.

\textbf{Vico's new 'rigorous' philosophical method}

In the \emph{New Science} Vico openly allows that he borrows the ‘rigorous philosophical method’ (‘\emph{il metodo di filosofare più accertato di Francesesco Bacone’) set out by Bacon in his \emph{Thoughts and Conclusions on Nature} \textsuperscript{258} However, he stresses, rather than employing it to study natural phenomena, he has ‘transferred [it]... to our human institutions’ (‘\emph{trasportato all' umane cose civile’}).\textsuperscript{259} That is, to the study of the origin of human ideas: the study of the origins or causes of ideas.\textsuperscript{260} However, as Sandra Rudnick Luft explains, ‘unlike the new science of his day his [Vico’s] new science does not study causes in the natural world’, nor does it ground ‘certainty on

\textsuperscript{257} Francis Bacon: \emph{Novum Organum} (1620) XIII/XIV. Printed in full at www.constitution.org/bacon/nov_org.htm.
\textsuperscript{258} Vico. NS, para, 163
\textsuperscript{259} ibid.
subjective doubt cut off from social and historical existence'.261 Developing the approach that he
found in Grotius, that humans make their own political institutions,262 Vico unites philosophy
with philology, to develop ‘what he called a “philosophical philology” and a “new science” – a
radically new approach to the understanding and study of human history’.263 By philology Vico
means ‘the science of everything that depends on human volition: all histories of languages,
customs, and deeds of various people in both war and peace’ (‘la dottrina di tutte le cose le quali
dipendono dall’ umano arbitrio, come sono tutte le storia delle lingue, de’ costumi e de’ fatti
cosi della pace come della guerra de’ popoli’).264 Thus, his new science involves the study of all
that people have made and done over the course of human history. For Vico, Bacon’s ambition
that his new science would yield the secrets of nature was an ambition that was beyond the
capacities of the human mind.265 Rather than wasting time attempting to discover that which it
could never know, the proper study of mankind should be man.

Somewhat ironically, having adapted Bacon’s ‘rigorous method’ for the study of things in nature
to the study of human institutions, Vico uses the same method to critique the view of human
history set out by Bacon in his Wisdom of the Ancients that the myths and fables of the ancients
were remnants of wiser and better times.266 In his Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians (De
Antiquissima Italorum Sapienta), (1712) Vico seems to show some sympathy with Bacon’s view

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261 ibid.
262 see ibid., p. 63
263 see ibid., xv
264 Vico. NS, para. 7
265 see Luft. Op.cit. (ibid., xvi)
266 see Francis Bacon. The Wisdom of the Ancients. 2004, p. 196. Kessinger Publishing’s Rare Reprints. Montana,
see also Vico NS, para, 384
that 'under some of the ancient fictions lay couched certain mysteries and allegories, even from
their first invention',\textsuperscript{267} when he says he 'came across a great number of Latin idioms pregnant
with profound wisdom'\textsuperscript{268} ('venendomi per dinanzi un gran numero di latini parlari pieni di
profonda sapienza').\textsuperscript{269} However, in his New Science, after 'a full twenty years of research'
('ricerca di ben venti anni'),\textsuperscript{270} he concludes that to see human beings as possessing the same
reasoning faculties across all of the history humankind is a conceit. The first gentile people were
not, as Bacon argued, rational or reflective beings who possessed knowledge of 'deep
philosophical mysteries which had been so locked in the casket of antiquity'\textsuperscript{271} that had become
lost or forgotten, nor did they live in a golden age. Rather they were savage brutes, more beast
than human, who spoke in monosyllabic poetic characters and whose myths and legends were
representative of the spontaneous or unreflected responses of the sensus communis - the
common sense judgements of the community - to the world around them. 'My discovery of the
true origins of poetry', he says, 'dispels the common belief of the incomparable wisdom of the
ancients, which scholars have eagerly sought to discover, from Plato to Bacon...' ('la quale
discoverta de' principi della poesia si è dileguata l'oppenione della sapienza innarrivabile degli
antichi, cotanto disiderata di scouprirsi da Platone infin a Bacone...').\textsuperscript{272} Thus, not only does
Vico reject Bacon's concept of an ideal, prelapsarian, state of humankind, but he also holds that,

\textsuperscript{267} Bacon, ibid.
Ithaca and London.
\textsuperscript{270} Vico. NS. para 338
\textsuperscript{271} Arthur Gorges's letter of introduction to Bacon's Wisdom of the Ancients addressed to 'The Lady Elizabeth of
\textsuperscript{272} Vico. NS, para, 384
in regard to the discovery of scientific truths, 'Baconian generalisations are not enough'.

While Vico reflects Bacon's antipathy to the abstract and the a priori, and his view that knowledge should be gleaned through scientific methodology, he maintains that when applied to the study of nature such knowledge leads to no more than probability. Since all that men can know with certainty is that which they themselves create, the proper employment of the scientific method should be the study of those institutions that are made by men.

In his autobiography, Vico goes some way to explaining the mechanics of his 'rigorous philosophical method' when he says that he discovered this new science by means of a 'new critical method for sifting the truth as to the founders of the [gentile] nations from the popular traditions of the nations they founded. Whereas the writers to whose works criticism is usually applied came thousands of years after these founders ('una nouva arte critica da giudicare il vero negli auttori delle nazioni medesime dentro le tradizioni volgari delle nazioni che essi fondarono, appresso i quali si doppo migliaia d'anni vennero gli scrittori, sopra I quali si ravvoglie questa critica usata'). In other words, Vico adopted the Baconian approach to look beyond the written historical accounts to the customs, laws, and institutions that had been practised within organised communities for thousands of years before any account of these customs or laws were ever recorded on paper (or papyrus). It is in virtue of this new critical methodology that Vico was able to uncover the true founders of the nations they founded.

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method, says Vico, that the ‘origins of almost all the disciplines, whether sciences or arts’\textsuperscript{276} (‘quasi tutte le discipline, sieno scienze o arti’)\textsuperscript{277} are discovered.

By employing his ‘new critical method’ Vico discovers what he calls ‘new principles of philosophy, and, first of all a metaphysics of the human race’\textsuperscript{278} (‘altri principi storici della filosofia, e primieramente una metafisica del genere umano’).\textsuperscript{279} By this he means the natural theology common to all nations that arises from humans’ natural inclination to create gods from their own imaginations. Piety and moral virtue began, says Vico, when early patricians, through the fear of these gods, came together to establish the institutions of religion, marriage, and interment\textsuperscript{280} - institutions, he maintains, that are fundamental to all civilised communities, societies, and which emerge to meet the needs of the people at particular times in the natural unfolding and refolding history of humankind.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen how the introduction of the printing press gave rise to a renewed interest in science during the Renaissance period. We have seen too how the development of the scientific method exposed the fragility of the traditional explanations of natural and supernatural phenomena. And we have seen how Vico, whist building on the approaches of Descartes and

\textsuperscript{276} Vico. ibid. (1975).
\textsuperscript{277} Vico. ibid. (2001)
\textsuperscript{278} Vico. ibid. (1975)
\textsuperscript{279} Vico. ibid. (2001)
\textsuperscript{280} Vico. Ns, paras, 503/504
Bacon, combined philosophy with philology to move beyond the mindset of the moderns to form his own new scientific method.

In sum, during Vico’s time the successes of science were deemed either to have arisen from the Cartesian method of \textit{a priori} demonstration or the Baconian ‘practical’ scientific method. Vico, whilst drawing on the scientific methods of both Bacon and Descartes, paradoxically, used his own version of the scientific method to deconstruct the conclusions of the moderns. Following twenty years of research, he came to conclude that there are no eternal and universal truths obtaining at all times and in all places; that the notion that the human mind had, since the dawn of mankind, not only possessed the same reasoning powers, but reasoning powers detached from the senses, was misguided; that scientific enquiry could not reveal the true essence of things in nature, and that all that we can ever know to be true is that which we make or do ourselves: conclusions, as the rest of the thesis will show, that are all fundamental to an approach that would later be known as postmodernism.
Chapter 4. What is Postmodernism?

Introduction

Although the term ‘postmodern’ is a nebulous term that can appear to mean many different things, it is fair to say that amongst the features most identifiable with a postmodernist approach are: the deconstruction of metanarratives or grand narratives; the unapologetic use of other, often unacknowledged but blatantly plagiarised, sources (intertextuality); a ludic or playful approach to writing, and the treatment of all narratives with a sense of ironic detachment and/or with healthy circumspection. A search for a more precise definition of the term succeeds only in confirming the features mentioned above. For example, it is defined alternatively as ‘a cultural development… which resulted from the general collapse in confidence of the universal rational principals of the Enlightenment’,\textsuperscript{281} as ‘… any work of art made after the Modernist era’,\textsuperscript{282} as an attempt ‘… to address the sense of despair and fragmentation of modernism through its efforts at reconfiguring the broken pieces of the modern world…’,\textsuperscript{283} as ‘a belief that individuals are merely constructs of social forces, that there is no transcendent truth that can be known; a rejection of any one world view as well as a rejection of the reality of objective truth’.\textsuperscript{284} It is also said if Descartes is seen as the father of modernism, then postmodernism is any position which rejects the major features of Cartesian modern thought.\textsuperscript{285} Whilst, with good reason, such references should be treated with some circumspection, these definitions are consistent with the

\textsuperscript{281} blackwellpublishers.co.uk/religion/relgloss.htm  
\textsuperscript{282} usi.edu/artinindiana/Glossary/glossary.html  
\textsuperscript{283} fajardo-acosta.com/worldlit/glossary.htm  
\textsuperscript{284} northave.org/MGMmanual/Glossary/Glossary.htm  
\textsuperscript{285} see hku.hk/philodep/upgrad/glossary.htm
definitions given in the writings of recognised postmodern thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida. Thus, in order to establish Vico as a forerunner of the postmodern approach, this chapter turns to show how the works of these two pillars of postmodern thinking reflect not only the characteristics above, but also how these characteristics mirror those contained in Vico's philosophy. It will consider the 'postmodern condition' as understood by Lyotard and Derrida and show how this 'condition' is anticipated in Vico's *New Science*. 

**Jean-François Lyotard and the 'Postmodern Condition'**

Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998), in his influential book *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) defines the term 'postmodernism' as 'the deconstruction of the metanarratives of modernity'. By 'metanarratives', or 'grand narratives', Lyotard means the belief systems or worldviews that underpin the legitimacy of a commitment or activity. That is, the values, judgements, laws and beliefs that are the very fabric of civil life: Christianity, Marxism, Islam or any other narrative that alleges to give a comprehensive account of a teleological process that ultimately leads to some idealised state of affairs. For Lyotard, the 'postmodern condition' is that which no longer accepts metanarratives as absolute givens. Rather it sets out to develop new sciences that can decipher, 'deconstruct', and demystify them so that they may be seen for what they are: narratives made by men for men.

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287 see ibid.  
According to Lyotard the postmodern condition should not be seen as one that necessarily follows the modern. Indeed, he says that ‘[a] work can only become modern if it is first postmodern’. What Lyotard means is that a narrative can only be accepted as ‘modern’ if it has first been analysed, dissected, demystified and deconstructed by postmodern scepticism. Modernity, says Lyotard, ‘in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without the shattering of belief and without the discovery of the “lack of reality” of reality, together with the invention of other realities’. While by ‘reality’ Lyotard means narratives which claim to represent reality, it should be said that he was not against narratives per se, in fact he recommends a society that is tolerant, pragmatic and pluralist, but against narratives that claim to be total explanations of human nature and history. Narratives, that is, that masquerade as absolutes unpolluted by worldly experience. Rather than setting up pan-national narratives, he maintains, each society should construct its own ‘petit récit’, its own ‘small narrative’ which resists the closure of totality. In order to ensure that these petit récits do not themselves become grand narratives they should be held open to the charge of falsifiability by deconstruction.

Postmodernism, for Lyotard, is inextricably linked to the modern: it means treating all that is new with circumspection. Postmodernism, thus understood, says Lyotard, ‘is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant’. Borrowing Ihab Hassan’s definition, one can say that for Lyotard, ‘modernism and postmodernism are not separated by an Iron...

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290 ibid.
291 see Robinson: Op.cit. (ibid., p. 41)
292 see ibid.
curtain or Chinese Wall; for history is palimpsest and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future'. Following Heraclitus, it seems that for Lyotard, the only thing constant is change. This concept of constant change is reflected in Lyotard’s view that human history is ‘inevitably and relentlessly cyclical’. A recurrence, maintains Lyotard, that recommences when the ‘grand narratives’ of modernism are repudiated by postmodern circumspection.

One of the issues that concerns the later Lyotard is that of the sublime. The sublime, he maintains, is ‘an aesthetic of denaturing’ that ‘breaks the proper order of the natural aesthetic and suspends the function it assumes in the project of unification’. It is experienced ‘when the imagination fails to represent an object which might, if only in principle, come to match the concept’. For Lyotard, the sublime is the striving of the imagination to present ‘[i]hose … [i]deas of which no presentation is possible’. This experience arises, he says, in virtue of a conflict, a contrario, of the pain and pleasure the imagination suffers in striving to ‘figure out that which cannot be figured’. In short, for Lyotard, grand narratives arise from the sensation

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Stanford University Press. Stanford
of the sublime that mind experiences in its attempt to present ideas for which no presentation is possible.

**Postmodernism and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)**

Lyotard’s view that small narratives should be constantly revisited, amended or reformed, is a view shared by his contemporary, and fellow postmodernist, Jacques Derrida. Like Lyotard, Derrida holds that there are no such things as narratives that remain constant throughout history. Since language is always metaphorical, he maintains, we cannot go beyond language to reach some kind of truth that lies outside our own immediate history and culture. Moreover, because language is a human creation it can never generate stable and total certainties.301 Language, he holds, is always inadequate: it can never fully communicate meaning. According to Derrida, Western culture’s preoccupation with logocentrism, the belief that the meaning of a word exists *a priori*, is erroneous. The interpretation of texts should be regarded as a process rather than something which is fixed. Deconstruction is a method of textual analysis applicable to all writing, philosophical and creative, which seeks to expose the inherent instability and indeterminacy of meaning.302 All narratives, says Derrida, should be held at an ironic distance and repeatedly exposed to the deconstructionist glare. Thus, postmodernism, as a philosophical position, is characterised not simply as a rejection of the idea of objective truths, but of the rejection of objective truths in tandem with an ironic detachment from *any* narrative that holds itself to be a fixed entity.

For Derrida, deconstruction demonstrates the instability of language upon which narratives are built. As rhetoric, language is employed to construct the alluring narratives that govern our lives. Following the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), Derrida understands language as a system of signs whose meanings cannot possibly be fixed.\textsuperscript{303} For Saussure, signs consist of two constituent parts: a signifier and a signified (that is, the word as it sounds or is written, and the concept or thing to which the word refers). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is both arbitrary and differential. That is, there is no innate reason why the signifier is related to the signified. Derrida also takes from Saussure the idea of ‘\textit{différence}’, an idea developed by the latter to draw attention to the arbitrariness of signs.\textsuperscript{304} Although sounds or signs are used to identify objects, each object is only identifiable because it relates to a different sound or sign. That is, they are marked by difference. For example, the word ‘dog’ differs from the word ‘log’ not because it is innately connected to the object, but because it was arbitrarily chosen to represent the object. In the French language, the term ‘\textit{différer}’ not only means ‘to differ’ but also ‘to defer’: to ‘put off’ or ‘postpone’. Because Derrida decides that Saussure has shown that no one sign has any meaning until it is related to the next sign and so on, he decides that meaning is always deferred by the text.\textsuperscript{305} Derrida spells ‘\textit{différence}’ with an ‘a’: as \textit{différance}, coining a neologism to signify both difference and deferral. \textit{Différence}, then, for Derrida, means the way in which meanings are produced through a process of self-differentiation and deferral which means that there can never be a full presence of meaning: never closure in what the text signifies. By invoking \textit{différance}, Derrida’s ambition is to show that all texts are

\textsuperscript{303} see Robinson: \textit{Op.cit.} (ibid., p. 37)
\textsuperscript{305} see ibid.
engaged in a process of referral and contamination of meaning that prevents the possibility of total explanation and total description.\footnote{see Dermot Moran: 'Derrida and Deconstruction' in Contemporary Philosophy. 1999. Oscail/NDEC. Dublin City University. Dublin}

For Derrida, language does not reveal truths but versions of what people believe or imagine to be true. The truths that are central to Western tradition are not unquestionable truths, but truths made by people themselves that have become absorbed by tradition into the historical process. It should be noted that Derrida does not deny the existence of such realities as beauty and goodness, but rather that these exist as transcendental realities. It is perhaps possible to relate to this by considering that what is often considered beautiful or morally acceptable in one culture may be considered quite the opposite in another.

Deconstruction is primarily concerned with encouraging people to re-examine the grounds upon which their worldviews are built. As Professor Stuart Sim reminds us, ultimately deconstruction should ‘be regarded as a very thoroughgoing form of philosophical scepticism that calls our unexamined assumptions into question’.\footnote{Stuart Sim: Derrida and the End of History. 1999, pp. 31/32: foon Books. London} For Derrida, the view that philosophy, religion, or any other human institution can reveal meaningful and lasting paradigms is an illusion. Since all worldviews are marked by the operation of \textit{différence}, none can claim to have a greater authority than the rest.\footnote{308}
Lyotard, Vico, and ‘new science’

According to Lyotard, rather than accepting metanarratives as universal givens, thinkers should develop new knowledge: new sciences, that would allow them to see these concepts for what they are: narratives made by men for men. As early as 1744, Giambattista Vico, in the third and final edition of his *Scienza Nuova*, anticipating Lyotard’s ‘postmodern condition’ by more than two hundred years, sets out to do just that when he announces that the first project of his new science must be the study of myths.309 For Vico, the term myth or fable can also be defined as ‘vera narratio’, ‘true narration’.310 However, by ‘true narration’, he does not mean that such narratives are true in an absolute or universal sense, but true in the sense that they represent the consensus of the majority at certain times in the history of humankind. ‘I have adopted the criterion’, he says, ‘that whatever all or most people feel must be the rule of social life’ (‘I' criterio che usa è che ciò che sento giusto da tutti o la maggior parte degli uomini debba essere la regola della vita socievole’).311 Like Lyotard, Vico maintains that the paradigms of previous thinkers cannot be interpreted within the context of contemporaneous values and experiences, nor without developing a new approach to philosophical investigation. This new approach must involve developing an understanding of how human consciousness itself has evolved over the millennia, and understanding also that feelings were more intense and ideas more crude in primitive societies and cultures than they are in modern times. It must also show that ancient myths contain historical clues which, properly deciphered, can lead to valuable insights into the lives of those who created them. Vico’s ‘scientific’ method involves careful examination of the

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308 see ibid.
309 see Vico. NS, para, 51
310 ibid., para, 401
elements that constitute human institutions. This method, he maintains, will not only
demonstrate that the myths of the ancients were in fact representations of their customs, values,
and laws, but that these customs, laws and values were myths created from their own
imagination.

Vico calls his method his *nuova arte critica*, his new critical art. Postmodernists call it deconstruction.

Vico’s new science, then, sets out to deconstruct the views held by his predecessors and
contemporaries regarding both the capacities of the human mind and the development of the
human race (Paradoxically, and reflecting the ludic dimension of his approach, Vico constructs
his own grand narrative which he challenges others to deconstruct). In studying nature – the
most fashionable topic of the age of the New Philosophy of Descartes, Bacon, Copernicus and
Gassand, contemporary thinkers had failed to see that they were attempting something for which
the human mind is not equipped. Like Lyotard, Vico believes they were trying to present
concepts for which no presentation is possible. Also like Lyotard, Vico holds that understanding
arises from doing or making: one can truly understand only that which one has created. Rather
than trying to grasp the ungraspable, human beings should address themselves to the study of the
human world: the laws and institutions, customs and practices that have been created by other
humans. For Vico, as it is for Lyotard, the proper study of mankind, he maintains, must be

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311 ibid., para, 360
312 see Vico: NS, para, 7
313 see ibid., para, 205
315 ibid.
According to Lyotard grand narratives should be abandoned and each society should construct its own ‘petit récit’: a narrative designed by the community to meet the needs of the community. Vico also sees narratives emanating from the community to meet the needs of the community. However, it must be said that while Lyotard argues that these ‘small narratives’ should be consciously constructed, for Vico, they arise spontaneously to meet the common sense needs of the community. While it may be considered that Vico’s approach does not meet the criterion of the postmodern condition it is interesting to consider the view of the avant-garde scientist Richard Dawkins on the subject of memes - a view, it must be said, that forges a link between Aristotle, Vico, and Lyotard. It seems that Dawkins draws the term ‘meme’ from the Greek word mimesis, ‘a noun which conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation’ (hence the connection with Aristotle). Dawkins informs us that he changed the three-syllable term to a monosyllable so that it would sound like the term ‘gene’. Memes, he maintains, can be anything from a ‘tune’ to ‘ways of making pots or building arches’. In the same way that genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body by way of sperms or eggs, so do memes propagate themselves in the meme pool of the collective consciousness through imitation. In the same way that Vico’s concepts arise to meet the needs of the community, so do Dawkins’ memes arise from the ‘meme pool’ to meet the psychological needs of people. Like Vico’s ‘universals’, Dawkins’ memes can include any predominant societal or cultural-ism. Some memes, he says, achieve brilliant short-term success while others can last

316 see Vico: NS, para, 142.
318 see ibid.
319 ibid.
320 ibid.
321 ibid.
many years.322 Like Vico, Dawkins holds that these ideas arise to meet the demands of society at specific times in the history of humankind. Like Lyotard, these ideas can be small narratives that arise as solutions to temporary exigencies. These ideas are spread through the community, not consciously, but by subliminal imitation. In the same way that Vico’s narratives articulate the needs of the community, so too, for Dawkins, are the demands of the people represented in the hypotheses of the mythmakers of the postmodern era.

According to Lyotard, the sublime is the striving of human imagination to present ideas of which no presentation is possible. Grand narratives arise, he maintains, when people attempt to explain the inexplicable. For Vico the first sensation of the sublime arose when the minds of the earliest peoples’, agitated by the conflicting sentiments of fear and awe that arose when confronted with phenomena that they could not understand, formed the first imagined universals: the first ‘grand narratives’. ‘When people are ignorant of the natural causes that produce things and cannot even explain them in terms of similar things,’ says Vico, ‘they attribute their own nature to them’ (‘Gli uomini ignoranti delle naturali cagioni che producon le cose, ove non le possono spiegare nemmeno per cose simile, essi danno alle cose la propria natura’).323 What Vico means is that in their desire to explain the unknowable, people attribute human characteristics to ideas that arise from natural causes. Thus, attributes such as anger, wisdom, benevolence, justice, become features of anthropomorphic deities, as we see in the of the bestioni’s concept of Jove. The more of these characteristics we bestow upon these deities, the more we are left with theology that is a

321 ibid., p. 207
322 see ibid.
323 Vico. NS, para, 180
misdescribed anthropology. While, when confronted by phenomena that engender sensations of the sublime, we seek to understand their true significance, our understanding is always constrained by our very nature to imagining only that which we know from experience. In short, for Vico as for Lyotard, the sensation of the sublime arises when people attempt to present ideas of which no presentation is possible.

Human history, says Lyotard, is a cyclical process during which recurrence begins when reason dictates that metanarratives of modernism should be challenged by postmodern scepticism. Not only does Vico also present a concept of the history of humankind as a cyclical process, but his view that regeneration begins during that period when, during the age of reason, men of reason, concluding that all concepts are made by men, reject any notion of an overarching deity, or an overarching system of laws, bears a striking similarity to Lyotard’s ‘postmodern condition’.

While Lyotard holds that all narratives should be treated with circumspection, he is not against narratives per se, in fact he makes the case that since it is we who create our narratives it is the privilege of the postmodernist mind to ‘imagine’ a society that is tolerant, pragmatic and pluralist. Vico also holds that there is a time in history when society becomes fragmented, and its citizens feel isolation and alienation. At this time it is the privilege of those of a certain mental disposition to encourage a return to a more commonsensical form of life. This occurs at that time in Vico’s cyclical history when a certain people, ‘with the aid of philosophy, which

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324 ibid., para, 189
325 c.f. p. 92
assists only a very few’ (‘[con] l'aiuto della filosofia, la quale non può soccorrere ch'a pochissimi’)\textsuperscript{326} turn away from their ego-centric lives, and, through the faculty of imagination, set the task of designing a more harmonious way of life. As with Lyotard, for Vico the positive side of deconstruction is that it allows for the creation of new narratives from the rubble of that which philosophy has deconstructed, demystified, and deciphered.

Because Vico’s history of humankind concerns the development of human imagination and thought, he calls it the ‘history of human ideas’ (‘una storia dell’ umane idee’).\textsuperscript{327} In the New Science, Vico maintains that while at each phase of history a particular level of consciousness is in the ascendant, different levels of consciousness exist, at varying degrees, within each phase. Even in contemporary society, he says, in the same way that primitive people attributed human characteristics to natural phenomena, ‘children pick up inanimate things and talk to them as if they were living persons’ (‘fanciulli di prender cose inanimate tra mani e, trastullandosi, favellarvi come se fussero quelle, persone vive’),\textsuperscript{328} and people of lower intelligence reduce things that are beyond their understanding to things they can understand.\textsuperscript{329} As Cecelia Miller says, in this way Vico’s history of ideas can also be described as ‘the different layers of each society’s consciousness’.\textsuperscript{330} To those who function at the first or primitive level of consciousness all things are creations of imagined deities and many things are believed to hold supernatural powers. At this level the power of reasoning is weakest and imagination

\textsuperscript{326} ibid., para, 19
\textsuperscript{327} ibid., para, 347
\textsuperscript{328} ibid., para, 217
\textsuperscript{329} see ibid., para 180
\textsuperscript{330} Miller. Op.cit. (ibid., p.131)
strongest. In the history of humankind Vico calls this phase the ‘age of gods’. At the next level people attach divine characteristics to other mortals whom they come to revere as leaders. Because these leaders also come to see themselves as divine, Vico calls this phase of history ‘the age of heroes’. At the next level of consciousness people come to see all men as equal. Vico calls this phase of history the ‘age of reason’. While at this level people set out to be ‘modest, benign, and reasonable’ (‘modesta, benigna e ragionevole’) in time, God comes to be seen either as detached from the physical world but responsible for its laws, or for others, a figment of human imagination. It is at this level that many of the latter, unfettered from the wrath of a fearful deity, and realising that all laws are man-made, create their own laws - their own narratives. Vico calls this state of consciousness ‘rational barbarism’ or ‘the barbarism of calculation’ (‘barbarie della reflessione’). Thus, allied to the third age is another level of consciousness - one can say a fourth level. This is a level of consciousness which is attained only by those, who, realising that to live well necessitates a re-evaluation of current values, move to create new social paradigms. Vico calls his paradigm a ‘rational civil theology’ (‘teleologia civile ragionata’). Because those of the fourth level of consciousness are of the minority (in Vico’s case it is a minority of one), some paradigms become misinterpreted by the masses who see those who formulate and articulate them as divinely inspired beings, and their narratives as irrefutable dogma. In what is essentially a polemic not only against Cartesianism, but also of any person, institution, or ism that claims to hold the monopoly on truth, Vico says that the cycle of

331 see Vico. NS: para, 916
332 see ibid., para, 917
333 ibid., para, 918
334 see ibid., para, 13
335 ibid., para, 1106
history begins when those who reject free-thinking return to a primitive form of metaphysics. Hence, in a rather daring but ingenious piece of rhetoric, Vico succeeds in damning dogmatism with faint praise, while, paradoxically, praising freedom-of-thought with damnation. In short, by identifying the perceived ‘perils’ of radical or unorthodox thinking, Vico points the way to an approach that we now call postmodernism.

Derrida, Vico and Deconstruction

Jacques Derrida shares Vico’s view that narratives are always circumspect and should be ever kept under review. According to Vico, any attempt to establish a criterion of discretion, which would allow us to make dependable commonsense judgements, is useless.\textsuperscript{337} Discretion, he says, ‘takes guidance from the countless particularities of events; as a consequence any attempt to grasp those detailed aspects, no matter how inclusive, is always insufficient’\textsuperscript{338} (\textit{Prudenza} ‘\textit{decide in base alle circostanze di fatto che sono infinite e la cui comprensione, per vasta che sia, non è mai sufficiente}’).\textsuperscript{339} Moreover, in real life nothing is more futile than to try to constrain common sense by general maxims. While for disciplines such as oratory, poetics, and the art of history-writing, preceptive aids, or rules of conduct, are useful, says Vico, they should be considered ‘merely as road signs’,\textsuperscript{340} and never as dicta written in stone.

\textsuperscript{336} ibid., para, 2
\textsuperscript{338} ibid.
\textsuperscript{340} ibid.
For Vico as for Derrida, language is a human invention. Vico regards language as a creation of
the human imagination because it only developed in social groups. Like Wittgenstein, he holds
that there is no such thing as a private language. The history of humankind, he says, is the
history of human ideas, and language is the conduit through which human beings give shape to
the thoughts that derive from their experience of the natural world. As Vico says, quoting
Aristotle, ‘nihil est in intellectu quin prius fuerit in sensu’, ‘nothing is found in the intellect
which is not found first in the senses’. Like Derrida, Vico holds that language is always
metaphorical; and like Derrida, he holds that the myths or ‘narratives’ of each society represent
the values of that society.

For Vico all figures of speech can be reduced to these four tropes: metaphor, metonymy,
synecdoche, and irony. The dynamic of these modes of expression is explained by Nancy S.
Struever where, in her essay ‘Vico, Valla, and the logic of Humanistic Inquiry’, she says, for
Vico,

... metonymy, synecdoche, and metaphor successfully delineate language as
plurisystematic and historical. Vico emphasises the temporal nature of the process: a
primitive concept struggles to reach the next level of elaboration or sophistication.

341 see Vico, NS, para, 347
342 ibid., para, 363
343 see Vico. NS, para, 409
Language relates to a limited repertoire of modifications of the mind, a repertoire which has one privileged direction of usage.344

Vico’s thesis is that metaphors arose when early men, ignorant of the true nature of things, began to attribute bodily parts and human emotions to animate substances and physical bodies. That is, it was through the use of metaphor that the early poets came to project human characteristics onto natural objects and occurrences and create myths of them. The first metaphor was Jove, god of the heavens with a voice of thunder. However when the sound of thunder became conceived as anger it became a different mode of expression: it became metonymic. The trope metonymy means that the characteristic of a thing is substituted for the thing. In the case of thunder, the characteristic anger was understood to represent the mood of the god. Hence, Jove, when he roared was an angry deity. As Hayden White explains,

[by] metonymic reduction, the thunder is endowed with all the characteristics necessary to permit the conceptualisation of it as a powerful, wilful, and purposeful being, a great spirit which, because it is similar to man in some of its attributes, can be treated with, served and, placated.345

However, once the trope Jove becomes a particular thing with distinct characteristics that allows him to be understood as a specific entity it becomes a synecdoche. That is, when the particular idea became conceived as a universal concept it became a synecdoche. Thus, for Vico, the ‘metaphor is a kind of primal (generic) trope, so that synecdoche and metonymy are viewed as special refinements of it, and irony is seen as its opposite’.346 That is, irony, as a mode of expression, not only represents the transition from metaphysical language to a ‘consciously figurative language (and thus into literal and denotative), or prose, discourse’,347 but it also represents that stage in Vico’s ‘ideal eternal history of humankind’ when men come to realise that language can be used to present false representations of reality. As Vico says, ‘[i]rony could clearly arise only in an age capable of reflection, because it consists of a falsehood which reflection disguises in a mark of truth’ (L’ironia certamente non potè cominciare che da’ tempi della riflessione, perc’ ella è formata in forza d’una riflessione che prende mascera di verità).348 Thus, for Vico, irony does not attempt to represent a version of reality in the way that metaphor, metonymy, or synecdoche does, rather it presents a falsehood in the guise of truth. For Vico, then, as for Derrida, irony is a feature particularly peculiar to a level of awareness which recognises that not only are grand narratives made by men but they can also be unmade by men.

An example of how Vico uses irony in this way exists in his treatment of the Church’s reaction to heresy during the Middle Ages. During this time, says Vico, Catholic kings everywhere set

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346 ibid.
347 ibid.
348 Vico. NS, para, 408
themselves up as protectors of the Christian religion. They adorned themselves in the robes of priests and abbots, took ecclesiastical orders, and founded military religious orders in their attempts to quell the challenge to Christian orthodoxy by the Arians, the Saracens, and other infidels. It was during these barbaric times that 'certain kinds of divine judgements returned, which were called "canonical purgations"' ("certe spezie di giudizi divini, che furon detti "prugazioni canoniche""). By this Vico means that, in the same way patriarchs of old believed that their harsh treatment of the plebeians was sanctioned by the gods, the Church leaders believed that the measures introduced to subdue heresy were divinely ordained. For the faithful, it was only by placing themselves, their families, and their property in the care of the priests and abbots that they could find refuge and protection from the 'utter savagery and ferocity of those barbarous centuries' ("ferocia e fierezza di que' secoli barabarissimi") and avoid being charged as barbarians. Whilst on the surface it may seem it is Vico's view that the actions taken against those who held opposing views to the status quo were justified, implicit is the view that the source of the patriarchs' authority and that of the Church leaders is the same - human imagination. Thus, although Vico's account appears to be a panegyric to Christianity's struggle with heresy, it is actually a polemic against the Inquisition's attempts to suppress radical or unorthodox thought. In short, by detailing certain events of this period of history in 'a mask of truth', Vico uses irony to discuss events that, he believes, reflection reveals to be false.

349 see ibid., para, 1048
350 see ibid.
351 ibid., para, 1052
352 see ibid., para, 388
353 ibid., para, 1056
For Derrida, although words refer to certain objects the sense of meaning they infer is always unreliable, and always marked by difference. Cecelia Miller reminds us that Vico also holds that words do not have fixed meanings. For Vico, she says, the 'supposed enlightened attitude that language should be as direct as possible, and that poetic, fanciful, rhetorical and figurative language should be avoided', was fallacious. Like Derrida, Vico holds that there is no such thing as a fixed logically perfect language expressing immutable verities. For Vico, this concept of concepts, so to speak, derives from the fact that early poets' limited and undeveloped understanding compelled them to apply terms such as Justice, Goodness, and Truth, to a broad range of similar but plastic concepts. For example, Vico reminds us that the concept of Justice in feudal times, when duels were fought with appeals to God to define a 'just' outcome, justice was deemed to fall in favour of the victor, even where that person was not the wronged party.

Hence, while we employ the term 'Justice' to refer to what we believe are the natural or God–given rights of people, this 'umbrella' term is but a convenient label under which these 'universals' are assembled. Those who insist that such 'universals' are other than concepts made by men, says Vico,

Remind me of certain individuals who have inherited from their parents a gorgeous mansion leaving nothing to be desired in point of comfort and luxury. There is nothing left for them to do except to move the furniture around, and by slight modifications, add some ornaments and bring it up to date... If it is true that the structure and foundations of

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see Vico. NS, para. 27
the cosmos are exactly as they describe them, then let those scientific pioneers be most fervently thanked. But if nature is organised differently – if a single one of those laws of motion established by our modern physicists is false (not to mention that already more than one has been proved false), let our enthusiasts pause and ponder whether they are not carelessly following an unsafe path, [for]... it may well happen that, while they are trying to repair the roof of the mansion, they may, at their peril, pay too little attention to the foundations.356

Assomigliano a coloro che hanno ereditato palazzi, ove nulla manc per magnificenza e comodità, onde suppellettile o abbellire la casa di qualche lieve ornamento, secondo la moda del tempo... [Si] la natura si comportasse come essi l’anno concepita, bisognerebbe ringraziarli, ma ove la sua constituzione fosse diversa e falsa anche una sola della norme fissate da codesti studiosi circa il moto (per non dire che non soltanto una se n’è scoperta falsa) stiano affenti a no trattare con sicuza la natura, sicché, mentre attendono a curare i tetti, trascurino con pericolo le fondamenta di quelle case.357

Here we see Vico anticipating what Karl Popper would later call the law of falsifiability. According to Popper the crucial concept in scientific explanation is not verification but falsification. That is, a scientific theory must be prepared to expose itself to the risk of falsification.358 Like Vico, Popper holds that the certainties of science do not guarantee

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358 358 see Scruton. Op.cit. (ibid., pp. 185-6)
unalterable truths. Physics, says Vico, studies things in nature – things not made by men. To place such studies (that is, the study of things we cannot know) above that which we can know with certainty – history, literature, and language - is unacceptable. Thus, when Vico talks of certainty what he means is the kind of knowledge on which ordinary rational action rests – *de facto* truths, not absolutes. So certainty is the knowledge of reality we glean from our immediate experiences. That is, certainties that arise in virtue of human necessities or utilities of social life,359 and certainties that derive, not from clear and distinct ideas exclusive to each individual mind before social intercourse, but certainties that arise from the *sensus communis*. The certainties around which and upon which we structure our daily lives are derived from common sense spontaneous evaluations designed to meet particular needs and utilities that arise within the group, community, or nation at particular times and in particular places. Thus, for Vico, universal concepts are not given *a priori* from some Platonic realm of Ideal Forms, but are concepts formed in men’s consciousness by common discourse. As Vico says, ‘minds are formed by character of language, not language by the minds of those who speak it’360 (*le indoli dei popoli si formano con le lingue e non le lingue con le indoli*).361 Hence, what are to Cartesians, ‘clear and distinct’ *a priori* ideas, are, for Vico and Derrida, merely convenient terms of reference for roughly similar, but changeable, concepts which arise in virtue of the *sensus communis* at particular stages in the eternal ideal history of humankind – and which emerge from the actual circumstances in which men live.

359 see Vico NS, para, 347
361 Vico. ibid., p. 141
For Derrida, postmodernism, as a philosophical position, is characterised by the fact that it treats all narratives with ironic detachment. In his *New Science*, Vico can be seen to be a forerunner of this approach as early as paragraph 43 where, having laid out an elaborate chronological table in which he details the development of human history from the time of the Jews to the time of the Romans, that is from the ‘Universal Flood to the Second Punic War’ (‘*dal diluvio universale... alla... seconda cartaginese*’),\(^{362}\) he goes on to say that the people and events either did not exist as set out in the table or did not exist at all.\(^{363}\) Vico infers that since all narratives are created by human imagination, that rather than being a slave to the worldviews of others, he has decided to create a worldview of his own. As Sandra Rudnick Luft says,

[T]he *New Science* is fictive... Even more, he [Vico] distinguishes his new science from the rational texts of scientists and philosophers who have forgotten the poetic [that is, made up] origins of their texts, by it in his own metaphoric language. He calls his first men *giganti* and *grossi bestioni*, the pattern of history itself a *corso*, then *ricorso*. Vico’s metaphors are ironic, to be sure, because he not only creates them but also knows them to be creations. They remind his readers that Vico knows that his narrative does not correspond “in the one true fashion” to images in the imaginative “minds” of original makers, or to actual events, or to an ideal pattern, but is his own *true fashion*... How ironic that Vico’s readers find the *New Science* obscure precisely because of the

\(^{362}\) Vico. NS., para, 43

\(^{363}\) see ibid.
metaphors that tell them they cannot read the *New Science* epistemically, but as a narrative.  

Thus, with a sense of irony and mischief somewhat akin to that of Thomas More when he set out to compose his famous critique of British and European societies, *Utopia*, Vico states that his narrative will show that ‘from the deep and impenetrable darkness in which they lay buried, there emerge other notable people and consequential events that produced or witnessed decisive moments in human history’ (‘da lunghe dencissime tenebre, ove giaciuti erano sepelliti, v’escon uomini insigni e fatti rilevantissimi, da’ quali e co’ quali son avvenuti grandissimi momenti di cose umani’).  

If one thinks that this rather hyperbolic statement might well serve as an introduction to Tolkein’s *Lord of the Rings* or Rowlands’ *Harry Potter* series, one has not missed its implicit irony.

The ludic dimension of the *New Science* reveals itself in the mindgames in which Vico engages with the reader. For example, throughout the work he repeatedly emphasises that all that can be known is that which we ourselves make. He then goes on to say that only the one true God can know things in themselves. However, since we did not create the concept of the one true God, only pagan deities, it does not follow that we can know of the existence of such a Deity. Moreover, his insistence that the Jewish race and the pagans developed separately and without cross fertilisation is contradicted by the fact that it was the offspring of Noah that were the

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364 see Luft. Op.cit. (ibid., pp. 189/190
founders of pagan nations. Furthermore, this playfulness is extended by his assertion that, notwithstanding his view that the notion of rebirth of the spirit, either into a physical body or into a world beyond the physical world, is a creation of the human mind, the graph of the Hebrew/Christian tradition moves ever upwards and onwards towards salvation, while the graph of the gentiles infinitely revolves. And while he repeatedly asserts that the dynamic that drives his historical process is divine providence, he also says that the concept of providence arises from human imagination. In fact, for Vico, the terms ‘providence’ and ‘divine’ are metaphors invented spontaneously by early poets to explain and/or foretell the effects of natural phenomena on their lives. As Luft explains,

What Vico calls ‘providential’ – the realisation of social goals – can only be the effects that naturally follow from the creation of the true things of the social world. While those true things – the artworks that set the world in place – emerge from the unintended individual choices, they must satisfy the beastly needs and utilities, and can only do so within the limits of natural necessity... Even more revealing... is his explanation of the way providence is called “divine”. “Divinari”, he says, to divine, means to understand ‘what is hidden from men – the future - or what is hidden in them, their consciousness’. In this way Vico associates ‘divine providence’ functionally with the interpretive practice of ‘divining’, the reading of what is ‘hidden’ in [human] consciousness – that is, the choices humans make that unintentionally lead to the social ends hidden from them in

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366 see ibid., para, 13
367 see ibid., para, 12
368 see ibid., para, 9

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‘the future’. Choices are hidden in ‘consciousness’ because the ‘consciousness’ by which men make their choices is none other than the linguistic and social practices that constitute the sensus communis.369

That is, the choices, or perhaps, more accurately, the judgements, men make are choices or judgements that arise spontaneously in the collective imagination of the community. As Vichean scholar Leon Pompa affirms, Vico’s claims about providence can only be explained if it is seen as nothing more than a derivative of the sensus communis.370 Thus, the key to understanding Vico as a postmodernist is contained in his own view that the ‘master key’ to his new science is the understanding that all concepts are metaphors, and all metaphors are imagined myths – and that this extends even to the concept of divine providence.371 In short, anticipating the ‘postmodernist condition’, Vico uses ironic detachment to set up a literary or philosophical space in which the values of his own tradition could be critiqued and deconstructed.

Further evidence of Vico’s ludic approach can be seen when he asserts that those ‘who claim that what they know was clearly understood at the beginning of the world’ are suffering from what he calls ‘the conceit of scholars’ (‘boria de’ dotti’).372 However, he then goes on to say that there is one thing that has always been known: that is that

371 see Vico. NS. ibid., para 9
372 ibid., para, 330
... in the dense and dark night that envelops remotest antiquity, there shines an eternal light and inextinguishable light. It is a truth that can never be doubted: the civil world is certainly a creation of humankind.

...in tal densa notte di tenebre ond'è coperta la prima da noi lontissima antichità, apparisce questo lume eterno, che non tramonta, di questa verità, la quale non si pio a patto alcuno chiamar dubbio: che questo mondo civile egli certamente è stato fatto dagli uomini'.

The sense of irony contained in this piece of alluring rhetoric cannot be missed. That is, Vico cannot possibly state in one breath that any claim to lasting knowledge is a conceit, and in the next breath hold that there is a truth that is constant. To make such an assertion is to place himself on the same footing of those scholars he accuses of being conceited. What emerges from Vico’s text is a deliberate attempt not to offer one worldview in favour of another, but to set up a dialectic that encourages all worldviews to be treated with the same kind of healthy scepticism. A view, it should be said, that is a reiteration of a view Vico presents in his earlier work, On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians, where he says of universal narratives: ‘how often do men sin in the business of living because they have arranged their life according to their [universal] maxims?’ (‘In vita, quam saepe pecant qui eam per themata instituerunt?’).

373 ibid., para, 331
Thomas Mautner reminds us that, for Derrida, deconstruction seeks to take apart a text in order to reveal how it contains within itself a hidden agenda which, when deconstructed, reveals the ostensible hidden meaning of the text. The challenge issued by Vico is precisely the same. In his history of the origin of ideas this rhetorical slight of hand is probably most evident in his treatment of religion. Although Vico maintains that there are two histories and two forms of religion, and that the truths of the Hebrews and Christians are given by the one true God, whilst the truths of the gentiles are imagined, he not only assiduously avoids any direct reference to Christ, but also makes only passing reference to the influence of his teachings. As Cecelia Miller points out, ‘[r]ather than Christian religion, Vico was concerned primarily with... pagan religion’. Robert Flint also notes that Vico

... made no attempt... to founded his system on Christianity, and he derived from Christianity little of the material which he employed in the construction of his system. Greek myths, Latin etymologies, history, and law of the ancient heathen world, were sources from which he drew much more freely than from Christian Scriptures... He was manifestly resolved to commit himself as a philosopher only to the assertion of a few fundamental religious principles involved in the common faith of humanity, and at the same time, to avoid if possible affording the occasion or pretext for accusations of heresy. His reticence in regard to all but the most general and essential doctrines of religion is a fact that should be distinctly noted.

376 see Mautner. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 122)
377 Miller. Op.cit. (ibid., p.84)
In his *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, Vico explains that he makes no mention of Christian theology because ‘I trusted you would not expect me to draw an indecorous comparison between truth and falsehood..., between Christ on the one side and Lycurgus and Numa on the other’\(^{379}\) (‘Non vi potevate aspettare che io, con pessimo gusto, paragonassi vero al falso, il divino con l’umano, cristo con Licurgo e con Numa’).\(^{380}\) However, by drawing attention to the differences between the absolutely fixed ceremonies and ‘unassailable dogmas’\(^{381}\) (‘fissò dogmi’\(^{382}\)) of Christianity, and the ‘shifting deities of Paganism’\(^{383}\) (‘l’adorazione di numi incerti [dei pagani]’),\(^{384}\) paradoxically, drawing comparison is exactly what Vico succeeds in doing. As Peter Burke says,

> despite his remarks about the accuracy of the Old Testament as a record of Jewish history from the creation onwards,... [and] his comparison of the law of Moses with Roman law and of the Bible with Homer he [Vico] does seem to place sacred and profane texts on the same level. One is left wondering whether in private Vico considers the Bible as a corpus of myth.\(^{385}\)

It must be argued that there is strong evidence to support Burke’s and Flint’s suspicion that in choosing to avoid any reference to Christ, Vico was couching his meaning in a way that would avoid any threat of a charge of heresy. To understand why this charge might be made is to

\(^{381}\) *ibid.*, p. 45. 1990
\(^{382}\) *ibid.*, p. 153. 2001
\(^{383}\) *ibid*. 1990
\(^{384}\) *ibid*. 2001
understand Vico’s definition of a hero or a leader of men. According to Vico during the age of humankind when the weak of any community are governed by the more powerful, there emerges spontaneously amongst the community a concept of those virtues that constitute the ideal leader. From time to time from within, there arises one who is understood by the sensus communis to embody these virtues. Moreover, not only do the masses attribute the title of divine to such a person, but the ‘hero’ himself also deems himself to be divine. While Vico draws attention to the fact that Achilles and Hercules meet this criterion, he leaves it to the reader to unearth (or, as Derrida would say, ‘deconstruct’) the ‘hidden meaning’ in the fact that he dutifully ignores any suggestion that the leader or founder of the religion to which he alleges to be aligned accurately meets his definition of a hero. The comparison between Vico and postmodernism is particularly significant when one compares the subliminal message in Vico’s definition of a hero with the view offered by American Continental philosopher, John D. Caputo, well known for his work on Derrida and deconstructionism, that the founder of Christianity should be seen, not as the physical embodiment of an omnipotent deity, but as symbol or ‘icon’ of an invisible God.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered some of the definitions of postmodernism. We have seen that postmodernism is represented by the collapse of confidence in the universal principles of the Enlightenment. We have seen that, historically, it can also mean any work that follows after the modernist period. We have seen that, since modern philosophy is deemed to have its

386 see Vico. NS para, 414
foundations in Cartesianism, postmodernism is a rejection of the major features of Cartesian modern thought. We have seen that postmodernism holds that human consciousness does not contain *a priori* ideas or concepts, and that there is no transcendental truth that can be known. And we have seen that Giambattista Vico’s *New Science* meets all of these definitions.

The modernist tradition, which overshadowed Vico’s philosophy, advocated the view that there was a unity of sciences: that the same kind of laws or principles can be found in each area of inquiry, including human affairs. Whilst it can be argued that this approach remained relatively unchallenged until the structuralist revolt that arose in France during the 1960s, this thesis shows that many if not all of the issues that postmodernist philosophers find difficult in modernist philosophy are set out by the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico in his anti-modernist polemic, the *New Science*. Whilst, *prima facie*, Vico’s ‘postmodern’ approach appears to obviate humankind’s dependency on metaphysical truths and allows that the disassembling of these truths can lead to selfish egoism and social fragmentation, in fact it announces that humankind has moved to an age in which it can be entrusted with the responsibility not only of creating values and structures that meet the needs and demands of the time, but also of having the maturity to ensure that these values and structures can never become a pool of stagnant dogma. Against the argument that Vico’s ‘new science’, as is Lyotard’s ‘postmodernist condition’ and Derrida’s ‘deconstruction’, is ‘just another concept’ made by men, it should be said that Vico’s cyclical process allows for a time when people turn away from the uncertainty

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that is a feature of the postmodern age to establish new certainties. However, for Vico, even this period will pass as humankind continues to challenge the boundaries of human knowledge and understanding.
Chapter 5. Towards Postmodernism

Introduction

Sandra Rudnick Luft, in her book *Vico's Uncanny Humanism*, says that it is a mistake to question as anachronistic Vico's affinity to postmodern ideas and argues that extensive comparisons can be made between such postmodern thinkers as Nietzsche and Derrida. However, whilst Luft sees comparisons between Vico's philosophy and those of a 'philosophy not formulated until long after his death', she falls short of seeing Vico as a precursor of postmodernism, and, as the sub title of her book, *Reading the 'New Science' between Modern and Postmodern* indicates, sees him more as a bridge between the two philosophical epochs.

This thesis takes the view that to fail to acknowledge Vico as a precursor of postmodernism is to fail to identify the comparison that exists between, not just Lyotard, Nietzsche and Derrida, but such other postmodern thinkers as Ihab Hassan, Michel Foucault, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Having considered the comparisons between Lyotard and Derrida in the last chapter, this chapter will examine Hassan's 'postmodern tendencies' to see how they relate to Vico; it will show that Vico can be read in the work of postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault; in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, whom Foucault and others credit with the title of founder of

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389 ibid., p.7
390 Nik Farrell Fox makes the case that whilst the work of Sartre has been superseded by postmodern philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida, and others, his book, *The New Sartre*, presents the first systematic study of Sartre's relationship with postmodernism (see *The New Sartre, Explorations in Postmodernism*, Continuum, New York, London, 2003, p. 3)
postmodernism, and it will also consider the work of Jean-Paul Sartre from a Vichean perspective.

Ihab Hassan’s postmodern ‘tendencies’

Ihab Hassan, acknowledging the resistance of postmoderism to any absolute interpretation or definition says ‘the concept of postmodernism implies some theory of innovation, renovation, novation, or simply change. But which one? Heraclitean? Viconian? Darwinian? Marxist? Freudian? Kantian? Kuhnian? Derridean? Eclectic?’\(^{391}\) While he goes on to say that postmodernism is neither a consciously directed movement nor a closed homogenous entity, Hassan’s inference that it is a process involving ‘innovation, renovation, novation’, and ‘change’ suggests a process that strongly resembles ‘Viconian’ circularity. This connection is further inferred by his observation that postmodernism involves a ‘fourfold vision of complimentaries, embracing continuity and discontinuity, diachrony and synchrony’.\(^{392}\) Implicit in this remark is the view that postmodernism involves a type of Vichean process through which values or ‘grand narratives’ are seen to arise in virtue of a dialectic process. As Hassan says, postmodernism ‘does not suggest that ideas or institutions cease to shape the present. Rather, traditions develop and even types suffer a seachange’.\(^{393}\) As we have seen, for Vico, the very first ‘seachange’ suffered by his primeval ‘types’ arose when they came to see themselves and the world in a different light following their creation of the imagined concept of an unseen deity. Further

\(^{392}\) ibid.
\(^{393}\) ibid., pp. 259/260
'seachanges' involve the development of the notions of marriage, interment, and human equality as immutable 'truths'.

While agreeing that 'conceptual problems lurk in the matter of postmodernism', Hassan does allow that there are two 'tendencies' which 'may bring us closer to its historical and theoretical definition'. That is, 'the tendency of indeterminance' and 'postmodern immanence'. By 'indeterminance', a term he coined by combining the term 'indeterminacy' with the term 'immanence', Hassan means a combination of trends which act as 'a vast will to undoing... the entire realm of discourse in the West'. A will or determination, that is, not only to treat all narratives with circumspection, but also to see new ones constituted or others reconstituted from those rendered redundant through ironic deconstruction. Amongst the trends of indeterminance Hassan lists ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, and deformation. Deformation itself, he says, accounts for other terms such as 'unmaking, decreation, disintegration... [and]... irony'. For Hassan, as it is for Derrida, irony is a trope peculiar to postmodernism. And like Derrida, he sees the shift from metaphor to metonymy and irony as marking the move from modernism to postmodernism.
Postmodern immanences, which Hassan insists have no religious implications, is a term he uses to designate the capacity of the mind to generalise itself in symbols, intervene more and more into nature, act upon itself through its own abstractions, and so become increasingly, immediately, its own environment. This noetic tendency may be evoked further by such sundry concepts as diffusion, dissemination, pulsion, interplay, communication, interdependence, which all derive from the emergence of human beings as language animals, homo pictor, homo significans, gnostic creatures constituting themselves, and determinedly their universe, by symbols of their own making.400

In short, Hassan infers that the continuing dialectic between indeterminance and postmodern immanence creates a literary or philosophical space in which grand narratives, under the gaze of irony, can be made and unmade in accordance with the demands of the time. In sum, for Hassan as it is for Vico, ‘the civil world is certainly the creation of humankind’ (‘questo mondo civile egli certamente è stato fatto dagli uomini’).401

Michel Foucault’s ‘archeologies’

Founder of a new French tradition of philosophy, postmodernist philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) shares Vico’s view that there are no universal and timeless laws that can be severed

400 ibid., pp. 269/270
401 Vico. NS, para, 331.
completely from the social practices in which they function. He also agrees that the individual’s concept of self arises and is formed at a communal level: through such constitutive activities as religion, politics and other instances of collective enterprise. Also like Vico, Foucault seeks to develop a history of ideas which, rather than seeing individual consciousness as the birthplace of ideas, sees it as the product or construct of institutional forces. In an argument that seems distinctly Vichean, Foucault holds that changes of public ideas precede changes of individual ideas.

Following Vico, Foucault’s concern is to bring history and philosophy together in order that an in depth analysis, or, as Foucault calls it, ‘archaeologies’, can be taken of historical discourses (Foucault’s term for thought when it is realised in social practice – in other words, what Vico calls ‘myths’, Foucault calls ‘discourse’). Where Foucault’s ambition is to construct a ‘history of the present’ by means of these archaeologies: to trace the mechanisms involved in the development of institutional discourses and their effects in modern culture, Vico’s aim is to construct a history of humankind by means of his ‘new scientific method’: his *nuova arte critica*. In the same way that Vico holds that individual consciousness is shaped by the *sensus communis*, Foucault holds that all discourse is determined by powers outside the control of the individual. However, it should be said that where Vico sees values arising as a spontaneous collective response to the needs of the community at particular times in the ever revolving history of humankind, Foucault formed the view that values are imposed on individuals by those

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in society who control discourse: those in charge of socialisation. However, while Foucault’s approach moves away from Vico in his assertion that ‘every kind of discourse is an attempt on the part of the user to exercise power over others’, it can be said that in the same way that Vico holds that his new scientific method would uncover the truths contained in ancient texts, and that these ‘truths’ are in fact made and not given, so too does Foucault hold that the discourse of those who control society ‘can be deconstructed successfully’ once it is realised that they are discourses made and controlled by men.

Giambattista Vico holds that human history is driven by a silent or unseen force of nature. This silent force he sometimes calls ‘providence’ and other times ‘conatus’. This force, he maintains, operates at a subliminal level: that is, it operates ‘without the knowledge or advice of humankind, and often contrary to human planning’ (‘senza verun umano scorgimento o consiglio, e sovente contro essi proponimenti degli uomini’). The ambition of Vico’s ‘new science’ is to show that this subliminal force, which acts upon all communities, societies, and nations in such a way that allows those institutions which form the basis of civilised society, is a law that exists in nature. Vico maintains that because this natural law was perceived as a force from which human customs of civilisation arose, it was seen as something ‘divined’ by

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404 see Magee. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 219)
405 ibid.
406 Vico: NS, para, 342
407 ibid., para, 2
providence.\textsuperscript{408} In the ‘Foreword’ (my italics) to his book \textit{The Order of Things}, subtitled \textit{An Archaeology of the Human Sciences}, Foucault, echoing Vico, declares that it is his ambition

\begin{quote}
\ldots to reveal a \textit{positive unconscious} of knowledge: a level that eludes the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse\ldots What was common to the natural history, the economics and the grammar of the Classical period was certainly not present to the consciousness of the scientist\ldots but unknown to themselves, the naturalists, economists, and grammarians employed the same rules to define the objects proper to their own study, to form concepts, to build their theories.\textsuperscript{409}
\end{quote}

Like Vico, Foucault’s goal is to uncover the unconscious laws that drive the ‘history of ideas’,\textsuperscript{410} and also like Vico, Foucault’s science sets out to discover that force that make institutions and ideologies possible’.\textsuperscript{411} What Vico calls ‘providence’ or ‘conatus’, Foucault calls \textit{epistèmes}. And in what for Vico is a subliminal force that acts in a self-regulating way to keep society on something of an even moral keel is, for Foucault, an ‘historical \textit{a priori}’\textsuperscript{412} that ‘serves as a sort of “intellectual underground” which all the scientific minds of that epoch unconsciously tap into or presuppose’.\textsuperscript{413} Thus, what for Vico is an unconscious force that energises the collective mind

\textsuperscript{408} see ibid., para, 9
\textsuperscript{410} see Vico: NS, para, 347
\textsuperscript{411} Foucault. Op.cit. (ibid., p. xxiii)
\textsuperscript{412} ibid.
of the community, for Foucault is a similar force that informs the collective mind of scientists. In each case this subliminal force acts on the collective consciousness of particular groups of people at particular times in human history.

For Vico, 'curiosity is an inborn human trait which is the daughter of ignorance and the mother of knowledge' ("la curiosità, proprietà connoturale dell'uomo, figliuola dell'ignoranza, che partorisce la scienza").  Man is curious, maintains Vico, because 'he is ignorant of the natural world, whose verum [truth] he cannot grasp'.  Conatus is the force that impels, or perhaps more accurately, compels, humankind to make sense of that world. But the sense that is made of the world is determined not by individuals but by the consensus of the majority. Foucault agrees that human curiosity is driven by a desire to know and understand the natural world. He also agrees with Vico that this 'will to truth' relies on community support. The will to truth, he says, is both reinforced and accompanied by whole strata of practices such as pedagogy – naturally – the book system, publishing, libraries, such as the learned societies of the past, and laboratories of today. But it is probably even more profoundly accompanied by the manner in which knowledge is employed in a society, the way in which it is exploited, divided and, in some ways, attributed.

414 Vico: NS, para, 189
While Vico sees the power originating in the general will of the people themselves, both philosophers agree that humans of all societies are driven by an inherent curiosity for knowledge and truth.

Earlier, in chapter 3, we saw the importance Vico places on the roles the faculties of memory and imagination play in the development of ideas. For Vico, since concepts cannot be grasped ‘without a vivid capacity to form images’417 (‘*senza attitudine a formare immagini*’),418 and since ideas are the issue of the twin faculties of memory and imagination,419 the modern approach of exposing young minds to philosophical criticism before the faculties of memory and imagination have been cultivated and nurtured is a mistake.420 According to Vico ‘children retain their ideas and names of people and things they have known first, and later apply them to others they meet who bear a resemblance or relation to the first’ (‘*fanciulli con l’idee e nomi d’uomini, femmine, cose, c’hanno la prima volta vedute, apprendono ed appellano tutti gli uomini, femmine, cose appresso, c’hanno con la prima alcuna simiglianza o rapporto*’).421 It is ‘by virtue of this resemblance’ (‘*per la qual simiglianza*’)422 that the earliest men, as children of the human race, were able to invent ‘poetic archetypes’ (‘*caratteri poetici*’) or ‘imaginative universals’ (*universali fantastici*).423 For example, it was the association, or resemblance, between the idea of an angry god, Jove, with the idea that this anger was aroused by their immodest behaviour,

417 ibid., p. 14
419 See Vico. NS, para, 211
421 Vico. NS, para, 412
422 ibid., para, 209
423 see ibid., paras, 209, 381
that forced the bestioni to bring order to their chaotic lives and to create the human institutions of religion, marriage, and burial. Michel Foucault shares Vico’s interest in the roles memory and imagination play in the development of ideas. Without memory, (or recall)\(^424\) and imagination, he says, ‘resemblances’\(^425\) could not arise. It is the combination of these faculties that ‘gives an account of the resemblance before their reduction to order’\(^426\). Imagination is important because without it ‘there would be no resemblance between things’\(^427\). Memory is important because it provides the mind with the ‘possibility of causing two impressions to appear as quasi-likeness (as neighbours or contemporaries, existing in almost the same way) when one of those impressions only is present’\(^428\).

In *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, Vico says that unless the mind is infused with the confidence and ability to imagine new and radical concepts, ideas would be simply moved about without anything being added\(^429\). In *The Order of Things*, Foucault says that without memory and imagination ‘perpetual change would pass before us without guidelines and in perpetual monotony’\(^430\). Thus in the same that, for Vico, memory and imagination play a central role in the creation of ideas and the development of human institutions, for Foucault, memory and imagination play a central role in the formation of resemblances, and the development of the sciences of order\(^431\).
In *The Order of Things*, Foucault tells us that language began when the ‘simple cries’ of primitive men ‘contained – if only within their monosyllable – a relation that was of the order of a proposition’.\(^432\) ‘What constitutes a word as a word’, he continues, ‘…is the proposition concealed within it’.\(^433\) That is, for Foucault the grunts, groans, moans and other expressions of the first men only became words when they were understood as judgements or statements proclaiming that something *is* something.\(^434\) For Vico language began when the fear of thunder caused the earliest men to call out in one voice ‘Jove’. It was the association of this monosyllabic utterance or statement with the image of a wrathful god gave rise to the first word.\(^435\) Since, by ‘Jove’, Vico’s *bestioni* were expressing the view that ‘thunder is the voice of a wrathful god’, it is clear that, for Vico too, what constitutes a word is the proposition it contains. According to Foucault, words are primary nominations of images derived from sensory experience.\(^436\) In other words, words are metaphors. As language develops, he maintains, these primary nominations become the starting-point for longer metaphors, which we recognise as synecdoche, metonymy, and catachresis.\(^437\) While Foucault’s approach echoes Vico’s view that synecdoche and metonymy evolved from the humble metaphor, where Vico includes irony as the third and most refined mode of expression, for Foucault it is catachresis that meets this definition.\(^438\) However, when it is recalled that Vico defines irony as ‘a falsehood

\(^{432}\) ibid., p. 102.  
\(^{433}\) ibid.  
\(^{434}\) see ibid., p. 103  
\(^{435}\) see Vico. NS, para, 448  
\(^{436}\) Foucault. Op.cit (ibid., p. 121)  
\(^{437}\) see ibid., p. 122  
\(^{438}\) ibid., p. 102
disguised as a truth’, and catachresis is defined as ‘a perversion or improper use of a word’,\textsuperscript{439} we realise that both philosophers share the view that language evolved from the monosyllabic metaphors of primitive men to the more complicated, duplicitous, and deconstructive modes of expression of more sophisticated times. Modes of expression, that is, that we now associate with the postmodernist movement.

In the same way that Thales’ peregrinations exposed him to belief systems that made him question those of his own Milesian tradition, so did Vico’s eclectic intellectual meanderings lead him to question the grand narratives of his own social milieu. Unlike Socrates, however, whom, it might be argued, at the time of choosing death by poison rather than reneging on his beliefs, had arrived at an age when the dread of one’s impending demise had lost its sting, Vico was not prepared to endanger his academic ambitions, his life, nor the welfare of his family to his philosophical cause. It could be said that it was only the third and final issue of the \textit{New Science}, an issue that was published in the year of his death in 1744, that Vico approaches his real philosophical intent. In his \textit{magnum opus} Vico sets out to reveal to those who took the time to decipher his text, the essence, or, as he calls it, the ‘master key’ (‘\textit{la chiave maestra}’)\textsuperscript{440} of his ‘new science’ which is that all concepts have their origins in the human imagination. In sum, what Vico came to realise is that social discourse was controlled, dictated, and orchestrated by institutions that held a vested interest in holding power over the minds of the people. In the case of Vico’s Italy, these institutions were controlled by the Catholic Church. In effect, Vico had


\textsuperscript{440} see Vico. NS, para, 34
intiated a line of philosophical inquiry that would be taken up more than two hundred years later by Michel Foucault. That is, like Vico, Foucault is concerned with the relationship between power and knowledge. All discourse, Foucault maintains, involves a power struggle: a desire by one party to exert power over another party. Moreover, he continues, all social discourse is controlled by those institutions whose interests are best served by controlling not only the manner in which knowledge is communicated, but also in the type and the amount of knowledge to which the people should have access. It can be argued that Foucault’s critique of society as a panopticon – a prison in which everyone is constantly monitored by those who control the reins of power, bears a striking resemblance to Neapolitan society of Vico’s time.

By way of showing how social indoctrination operates, Foucault, in his *Madness and Civilization*, his *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*, and in *The History of Sexuality*, points to the way social attitudes to such issues as mental instability, crime, and sex have changed over the course of history. While Vico holds that these changes in virtue of collective mind’s spontaneous responses to changing needs of the times, as shown above, it can be argued that his approach to the manner in which he felt obliged to present his own *magnum opus* does not support this theory. That is, Vico’s own discoveries emerged not by way of unreflected responses to his own circumstances but only following many years of painful and arduous study.

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441 see Mautner. Op.cit. (ibid., 205)
442 as shown in chapter two
443 see Vico. NS, para, 338
As adverted to above, Vico was aware that in order to avoid being treated as an outcast by the authorities he needed to formulate his discourse within a certain pre-determined set of criteria. Foucault also holds that there are societal rules that govern our discourse. He calls these rules the ‘rules of exclusion’.444 Echoing the position in which Vico found himself, Foucault says that ‘we know perfectly well that we are not free to say anything, that we cannot simply say anything, when we like or where we like.’445 These prohibitions on freedom of speech are not restricted to issues that are simply socially gauche, but go so far as to label those who do not follow the ‘rules of exclusion’ as social outcasts. ‘From the depths of the Middle Ages’, says Foucault,

a man was mad if his speech could not be said to be part of the common discourse of men. His words were considered null and void, without truth or significance, worthless as evidence, inadmissible in the authentification of acts or contracts.446

Foucault goes on to draw attention to the fact that the rules of exclusion extend to what he calls ‘Doctrinal adherence’.447 Doctrinal adherence, he says,

... involves both speaker and the spoken, the one through the other. The speaking subject is involved through, and as a result of, the spoken, as is demonstrated by the rules of exclusion and the rejection mechanism brought into play when the speaker formulates one, or many, inassimilable utterances; questions of heresy and unorthodoxy in no way

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445 ibid.
446 ibid., p. 340/1
arise out of fanatical exaggeration of doctrinal mechanisms; they are a fundamental part of them ... Doctrine links individuals to certain types of utterance while consequently barring them from all others. 448

In a climate in which one is free to exaggerate doctrines as long as one doesn't refute or reject them, and given that this resembles the climate of Vico's Naples, it is little wonder that the Italian philosopher chose his words with such care. It can also be said that it is significant, if not somewhat ironic, that the mechanism for exclusion so evidently in place during Vico's time, mechanism that one might imagine would be either extinct or at least anachronistic some two hundred years later, should be so clearly identified as an integral part of social discourse in the postmodernist philosopher Michel Foucault in his *The Order of Things* and his 'Discourse on Language'.

**Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900): 'founder of postmodernism'**

In his book *The Order of Things* (1964-5), Michel Foucault identifies Friedrich Nietzsche as the founder of postmodern philosophy. Nietzsche, he says,

... marks the threshold beyond which contemporary philosophy can begin to start thinking again; and he will no doubt continue for a long while to dominate its advance. 449

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447 ibid., p. 331
448 ibid.
This thesis takes the view that not only is Vico entitled to be considered as a worthy contender for the title that Foucault bestows on Nietzsche, but it also holds that much of Nietzsche’s ‘postmodern’ approach is anticipated by Vico in his New Science. For example, in the section entitled ‘Establishing Principles’ Vico details how society evolves and revolves - corso and ricorso - from feudalism to anarchy and back again. Having initially given up their nomadic ways (Hobbes would say having given up a certain amount of their individual freedom) in return for a more secure and settled life under the nobles or heroes, the plebeians, becoming increasingly aware of their worth, seek equality. The ensuing conflict which arises as a result of this desire for equal rights results in the formation of democracies. However, because of the nature of humankind, the democratic state becomes corrupt and oligarchies arise. Eventually, certain of the one-time plebeians seek to set themselves above the law to become lawmakers themselves. Vico’s calls this kind of individual the ‘patriarch’ or ‘master’. As one who considered himself above the law, it seems Vico’s ‘master’ bears a characteristic that Nietzsche would later consider integral to his concept of the ‘übermensch’. Both Nietzsche and Vico also agree that throughout the history of mankind inequalities have existed in all human societies. Even in the most primitive societies where wealth and property were virtually non-existent, as Vico has shown, the theological poet, as interpreter of auspices, sat at the top of a hierarchical system, and during feudal times the main form of social organisation in Europe involved a hierarchy of authority, rights, and power that extended from the ruler downwards. In short, both Nietzsche and Vico share the view that where any group of human beings come together the natural inclination is that this gathering will form itself into a system of social stratification. The

450 see Vico:NS, para, 292
question they attempt to answer is how this stratification, or hierarchical system occurs. For Vico, it arises in virtue of a providentially ordained circular historical movement of progression and regression through which humankind must inevitably pass. For Nietzsche, the answer is found in the natural predilection of the individual of the ‘will to power’.

Nietzsche argues that individual consciousness is shaped by society, and that our ‘concepts... are constructed by humans for their own peculiarly human purposes’, or as Vico maintains, to meet the needs or utilities of society at particular times in the ever revolving history of humankind. Following Vico, Nietzsche claims that our conceptual ordering of the world as we experience it arises from the need to simplify or fictionalise our experience in order to make sense of the world. He also argues that through the will to power, the individual can shake off the shackles of institutional conditioning to become the *übermensch* – the ‘overman’ or master. However, where for Nietzsche, the master is the ultimate in human development, for Vico, it is a particular stage in an ongoing and eternal historical process.

According to Vico, society begins to dissolve towards the latter phase of the age of reason when men, intoxicated with their intelligence and self-worth lose all interest in the welfare of the wider community and turn their focus on their own personal needs and desires. Like Vico, Nietzsche holds that the Enlightenment, with its ‘ambitious aims and naïve doctrine of human

452 see ibid.
perfectibility,” leads to the fragmentation of human society. Both Nietzsche and Vico, then, take the view that democracy, ultimately, leads to the dissolution of power. According to Nietzsche this dissolution arises from the worship of mediocrity and an abhorrence of excellence. In a democracy, he says, the natural process becomes inverted, society loses its character; mediocrity becomes the accepted norm. For both philosophers, instead of the hero, the average man becomes the ideal. The Christian God, for Nietzsche is the Jove of Vico’s primitives: an imagined deity with anthropomorphic attributes bestowed by ignorant people with limited awareness. Fathers of Christianity, Nietzsche maintains, have indoctrinated the masses with erroneous values and beliefs – what Vico would call conceits. The triumph of Christ, he claims, was the beginning of democracy. Humans, he maintains, are hierarchical animals, but this predilection has been systematically eroded by the debilitating effects of Christianity. In the same way that Vico’s primitives are enslaved by a fear of a thunderous god, so too are Nietzsche’s Christians indoctrinated into a slave mentality by the Institution of the Church.

The master/slave concept of Vico is portrayed by Nietzsche as an Apollonian/Dionysian relationship. That is, Nietzsche saw the pre-Socratic Greeks as belonging to the ‘Golden Age’ against which all other historical periods could be measured. Thinkers like Thales, Heraclitus and Empedocles, he believed, were ‘noble, free, creative and passionate’. For Nietzsche, the erosion of ‘true’ human values had begun with Socrates when he advocated a development of one’s ‘Apollonian’ or intellectually disciplined nature at the expense of one’s ‘Dionysian’ strong

and courageous qualities. This softening of the human psyche was continued by Christianity which, according to Nietzsche, was contrary to life and dignity; and manifests a slave mentality. According to Robert Holub, Nietzsche held the view that the persistence of Christian belief is a sign that the human being has not developed into a creature strong enough to achieve a true, self-contained, nobility of spirit.\textsuperscript{457} For Nietzsche, then, a pre-Socratic type of society offers the best societal structure: a hierarchical structure in which the strong and courageous dominate the weak. That is, a society in which might is right and the only good is that good benefits those who exercise their ‘will to power’. However, while, for Nietzsche this state of mind is the nearest one can get to human freedom, for Vico, the Nietzschean phenomenon – the \textit{übermensch} mentality – is an inevitable stage in the history of humankind. That is, for Vico, to remain in such a state of consciousness is to remain in a state of arrested development.

Nietzsche shares with Vico, and Lyotard, the view that the history of humankind is inevitably and relentlessly cyclical. History does not follow the principle of linear accumulation and progressive enhancement, he says, rather it revolves in an ever expiring and expanding cycle.\textsuperscript{458} However, where Vico sees the history of humankind as a process of recurring phases, Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence goes further and sees human beings trapped in a kind of cosmic ‘Groundhog Day’ cyclical process in which they are reincarnated to relive each and every moment of one’s life \textit{ad infinitum}. In an essay entitled ‘Fate and History’ (1862) Nietzsche describes this process in the image of a cosmic clock which ‘moves along, only to

\textsuperscript{456} ibid.  
\textsuperscript{457} see Holub. Op.cit. (ibid., p. xvi)
begin its passage all over again after twelve’. Given such a state of affairs, says Nietzsche, ‘one should live each moment in such a way that it can recur without occasioning horror’. Nietzsche held that once one came to grasp the reality of history as a series of never ending cycles one would ask oneself ‘is this something I want to be doing countless times?’.

According to Vico, when the primitives heard thunder they imagined that they were hearing the fearsome howlings of an anthropomorphic god. From these fears and imaginings arose religion, and with religion came shame. Sexual relations, once practised openly and without guilt, were now acts of indecency, and were to take place only within the sanctity of the married state – and in private. Over time, stable families were formed which, in further time, led to the formation of a complex hierarchical society. Unlike Hobbes’ ‘solitary, nasty, and brutish’ individuals who were motivated by self-interest to enter into a social contract with a sovereign power in order to safe-guard their families, their possessions, but mainly themselves, for Vico’s bestioni it was fear of an unseen deity that caused them to modify their passions, devise laws, and establish civil institutions. Self-interest alone, says Vico, would not have been enough to curb the savage egotism of these early giants. Thus, it was religion not self-interest that raised men from their wild beginnings. Nietzsche also shares Vico’s view that the primitive mind attributes human

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characteristics to natural phenomena, and in the same way that Vico’s pagans looked to the heavens and saw Jove as an all-seeing god, so do Nietzsche’s men look into space and imagine ‘the eyes of the universe trained from all sides on his action and thought’. Thus, in the same way that Vico saw the institutions of religion, marriage, and the belief in the immortality of the soul arise from early man’s belief in anthropomorphic gods, so does Nietzsche hold that human morality developed in relation to man’s belief in spirits, gods, or a God. These beliefs, says Nietzsche, are concentrated images of the world that arise from man’s attempt to engage in dialogue with nature. ‘Events in nature’ he proclaims, echoing Vico, ‘are vital for mythical consciousness’. Nietzsche, as would Foucault, called this examination of historical origins ‘genealogical’ histories. Like Vico, Nietzsche believed that his historical investigations showed that concepts thought to be universal, eternal, or a priori, were in fact contingent human constructs with specific histories. John Shand reminds us that the key to understanding Nietzsche’s philosophy is his attack on absolutism. In his New Science Vico reminds that the ‘master key’ to his philosophy is that universals are concepts conceived by theological poets.

Until the introduction of his new science, his ‘nuova arte critica’, says Vico, philosophy had avoided discussing questions of philology. As adverted to in Chapter 3, by ‘philology’ Vico

462 see ibid., p. 174
463 ibid.
466 see Safranski:Op.cit., ibid., p.87
467 see Robinson. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 69)
469 see Vico. NS, para ,334
means 'the science of everything that depends on human volition: all histories of languages, customs, and deeds of various peoples in both war and peace' ('la dottrina di tutte le cose le quali dipendono dall'umano arbitrio, como sono tutte le storia delle lingue, de'costumi e de' fatti così della pace come della guerra de' popoli').

Philology, for Vico, is what we now regard as anthropology: the study of historical cultures. By treating philosophy as science, he maintains, philosophy reveals the lineaments of the history of humankind and that truths handed down by tradition are really myths made by men. Edward Said reminds us that Nietzsche also sees 'philology as something born, made in the Viconian sense as a sign of human enterprise', and that he, like Vico, understands truths to be embodied in language. The truth of language is but:

... a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are.

Like Vico, Nietzsche holds that 'truths' or 'grand narratives' represent people's attempt to articulate their understanding of the world in which they live and the energy or power that animates that world. Philology is the science of bringing to light the fact that the words that

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470 see Vico. NS, para 7
communicate these or perceived or conceived 'truths' are metaphors, and that the truth that these metaphors express are myths made by men.

A Vichian perspective of the postmodernist approach of Jean-Paul Sartre

Although the French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre is not one usually associated with the postmodernist movement Ihab Hassan reminds us that Sartre 'stands at the crossroads'\textsuperscript{473} of modernism and postmodernism. Indeed, even in his early work, says Hassan, Sartre exhibits a postmodern approach to universal concepts where he denies 'all a priori in the human condition'.\textsuperscript{474} This approach, as is well aired by now, represents Vico's anti modernist stance. By way of endorsing Sartre's Vichian spirit, Nik Farrell Fox, in his recent publication, \textit{The New Sartre}, informs us that like Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault, and other postmodernists, Sartre 'offers a trenchant critique of modernity and a deep searching towards the project of the Enlightenment'.\textsuperscript{475}

In his early works, \textit{The Transcendence of the Ego}, \textit{Nausea}, and \textit{Being and Nothingness}, Sartre discusses the issue of the ego from a Cartesian perspective in that he theorises the subject in isolation from language and presupposes that any linguistic determination of the self will not effect it in any substantial way.\textsuperscript{476} This is particularly evident in \textit{Nausea} where the protagonist Roquentin comes to the realisation that his essential self and that which he has become, the referent, which in his case is an historian, are not one and the same. In his middle phase,

\textsuperscript{473} Hassan. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 143)
\textsuperscript{474} ibid.
however, Sartre moves even closer to postmodernism, and to Vico, where, in *What is Literature?* and *Saint Genet*, he acknowledges the role of language in the construction of the self, and of a world created by man. In *Saint Genet*, for example, language is seen as Genet’s ‘most inward reality and most rigorous expression of his exile’,\(^{477}\) whilst in *What is Literature?*, writing and words are seen as essential mediums of expression within a community. By the time of his later works, which include *Critique of Dialectical Reason, The Family Idiot*, and *Search for a Method*, Sartre not only sees self and language deeply and irrevocably entwined, but also that, through language, the world of man is created by man. As he says in *Search for a Method*:

> Significations come from man and from his project, but they are inscribed everywhere in things and in the order of things. Everything at every instant is signifying and significations reveal to us men and relations among men across the structures of our society. But these significations appear to us only insofar as we ourselves are signifying.\(^{478}\)

Perhaps the most striking shift between the early Sartre and his later work is in the concession he makes in both his autobiography, *The Words*, and *The Family Idiot* that the self is determined by one’s social grouping – or as Vico says, from *the sensus communis*. Whilst this ‘Vichean’ shift is first glimpsed in *Search for a Method* where he says that to study the development of a child within the family is ‘to study the process by which the child, groping in the dark, is going to

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\(^{476}\) see ibid., p. 22


attempt to play, without understanding it, the social roles which adults impose on him’. In *The Family Idiot* Sartre goes further when he sets out to show, in the case of the protagonist Flaubert, that ‘the structures of [the] family are internalised in attitudes and re-externalised in practices by which the child makes himself be what others have made of him’. Thus, we can see that where Sartre’s early work focuses on the ego, his later work conceives the self in a more Vichéan context: that is as formed predominantly by societal and familial forces or influences. Indeed, by the time he came to write *The Family Idiot*, he has moved so far from his early concept of the self that he is prepared to say that he no longer conceives the self as a ‘nihilating consciousness, but as ‘a function of the society in which he lives’.

According to Iris Murdoch, Sartre’s shift from his ‘solipsist centre’ takes place in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* where, in contrast to *Being and Nothingness*, he concedes that man is no longer an isolated individual, but a social being whose actions are shaped by his social environment. For Vico, the laws of humankind arise to meet the needs or utilities of the *sensus communis*. These laws, he maintains, derive from the interaction that occurs between human imagination and the natural world. Sartre calls this interaction ‘practico-inertia’. By practico-inertia Sartre means the dialectic that takes place between human praxis and inert matter. It is in virtue of this dialectic that human beings not only create the conditions which satisfy their needs, but in doing so they also create the conditions which lead to their own demise. Thus, in

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479 ibid., p. 60
481 ibid., p. 442
483 see Fox. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 58)
the same way that Vico’s dialectic process leads to ‘rational barbarism’ or ‘barbarism by reflection’ (‘barberie della riflessione’), and social fragmentation, so too does the dialectical process of Sartre’s practico-inertia ultimately ‘negate and totalise’ the laws it creates. And in the same way that Vico’s dialectical process leads to a situation where societal structures must be re-invented to meet the needs or utilities of each new phase, for Sartre, ‘in dissolving the inherited practico-inert [of one phase]... the society... has as its outcome, in a slightly different context, the constitution of another pratico-inert that [in turn] reconditions men’. 

As already shown in this thesis, in his *New Science* Vico holds that civic institutions arose when early men, fearing the wrath of an unseen but powerful deity, Jove, felt obliged to control, what they perceived to be, their illicit, and therefore forbidden, passions. However, during the age of reason, when this unseen force was understood to be a figment of men’s imagination, the institutions were also seen as human creations. Vico’s circular historical process begins anew when the survivors of the age of dissolution move once again to restore order in an hedonistic world. Like Vico, for Sartre, group solidarity emerges as a reaction against fear and imminent threat. Also like Vico, once this threat is removed society dissolves and falls into dissipation. And like Vico, order is restored when society re-invents structures which will bind people together as a whole.

484 Vico. NS, para, 1106
485 see Fox. Op.cit. (ibid.)
487 see Fox. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 65)
In his short work, *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936), a polemic against Husserl’s philosophy of pure phenomenology, Sartre argues that there is no such thing as a pure disinterested perspective and no transcendental ego.\(^{488}\) Echoing Vico, Sartre holds that an objective, passive and pure perspective of the world is simply impossible. It is impossible, he maintains, because without particular intentional acts arising from our existence as beings-in-the-world engaged with that which concretely concerns human beings, consciousness would not arise at all, since the being of consciousness is defined by its ‘aboutness’ of something other than consciousness itself: something that is not conscious. Consciousness is not a thing at all, not even a transcendental thing ‘outside’ the world. If all actual intentional acts, directed to something other than consciousness are removed, then consciousness simply evaporates; so there can be no disinterested transcendental ego ‘outside’ the world.\(^{489}\)

For Vico, human consciousness arose when human beings, still more animal than human, were forced, by dint of dramatic change in natural events, to see themselves as beings-in-the-world with other phenomena. Until this time the lives of these primitive men were dominated by animal instinct, intuition, and sensory needs. It was only when changing climatic conditions caused them to turn their gaze outward and upwards that human consciousness arose. Thus, for Vico, as it is for Sartre, it is only in virtue of intentional acts arising from their existence as beings-in-the-world engaging with things that concretely concern them that human consciousness arises. Hence, for both philosophers, the world of humankind is a world in which

\(^{488}\) see Shand. Op.cit. (ibid., p. 249)  
\(^{489}\) ibid.
all ideas, paradigms, values, and grand narratives, arise from man’s desire to understand the world and his place in it. In such a world, they hold, there are no universal or fixed concepts waiting to be discovered by an ego that is detached from the material world. All such concepts, they argue, are made by men.

Sartre, as does Vico, rejects Descartes binary concept of human existence. No one who is concerned with man’s direct relationship with the world of nature, Sartre maintains, could possibly entertain such a naively dualistic view of the world. Rather than locating the essential self in a solipsist vacuum it is essential that philosophy places man in his context in the world. In such a world, Sartre tells us, man comes to realise that he himself is the source of all values.

For Vico, the defining emotion that occasioned humankind to see themselves from the perspective of the ‘other’ is the feeling of shame that arose when the first men came to believe that their practice of satisfying their most base passions openly and without guilt was being observed and condemned as an act of indecency by an omnipotent god. This sense of guilt arose, says Vico, spontaneously or ‘without reflection’ (‘senz’ alcuna riflessione’). In his Sketch for a Theory of Emotions, Sartre also sees emotion as a particular way of apprehending the world. To experience the world though one’s emotional centre, says Sartre, is to experience it as fantasy

491 ibid.
492 Vico. NS, para, 142

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or magic.\textsuperscript{493} That is, it is to see things in a particular light. For example, whenever the apprehension of an object evokes the sensation of fear, the mind spontaneously attempts to transpose that emotion into an image that it can apprehend. As Warnock explains, for Sartre, ‘we operate upon the world, we feel moved by the world, we perceive the world. All these happen together’.\textsuperscript{494} When we compare this view to that expressed by Vico in his \textit{New Science} that ‘it is a property of the human mind that whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand’ (‘è \textit{altra proprià della mente umana ch’ove gli uomini delle cose lontane e non conosciute non possono fare niuna idea, le stimano dalle cose loro conosciute e presenti’),\textsuperscript{495} particularly one adds that whatever is attributed to these ‘distant and unknown things’, arose unreflected in the mind, we find that Sartre’s ‘postmodern’ position had been adopted some considerable time earlier by an uncelebrated Neapolitan thinker.

For Sartre, as it is for Vico, a defining feature in the fashioning of one’s concept of self is the feeling of shame that arises when one believes that one is being judged by forces outside of oneself. Sartre calls this ‘\textit{le regard de l’autre}’, ‘the look of the other’.\textsuperscript{496} By way of explaining how this emotion arises Sartre, in \textit{Being and Nothingness}, describes a situation where a man, moved by jealousy or curiosity, looks through a keyhole and listens at a door. Whilst doing this he is so completely absorbed in what he is doing that he has no room in his consciousness to observe anything else that may be happening around him. He sees the door, the keyhole, and all

\textsuperscript{493} see Warnock. Op.cit., ibid., p. 107
\textsuperscript{494} ibid., p. 108
\textsuperscript{495} Vico. NS, para 122
his surroundings as objects, either as obstacles or aids, to his mission. Suddenly, he hears a sound in the passageway and he becomes aware that he is being observed. In an instant, his existence is reconstituted in a wholly different way - he sees himself in a new light. He becomes aware that he exists as something to some other person - in this case as a 'peeping Tom'.\textsuperscript{497} He realises that if the other person was to describe his actions in that moment he would say that he was ‘caught in the act’, ‘snooping’, and so on. These descriptions, he acknowledges, would be quite legitimate. He not only becomes aware that he exists as an object to the ‘other’ that is observing him, but that these labels define how he is seen by the other and he feels ashamed. Sartre, in this anecdote, is attempting to show how the emotion of shame arises. The point of the story is to show that the change of consciousness occurs at the precise moment that the man becomes aware that he is the object of someone else’s observation, for it is at that moment that the feeling of shame arises in him. Thus, for Sartre, as it is for Vico, one’s self image is determined, not by some Cartesian reasoning homunculus, but by how one ‘imagines’ one is perceived by ‘the other’.

Another important point that emerges from the story of the ‘peeping Tom’ is the fact that from the moment the person becomes aware that he is being observed he begins to attach labels to the ‘other’. That is, he begins to see the other as a thing: a crystallised entity. Sartre holds that human beings are driven by natural curiosity to the natural world in general, and one’s self and the self of others in particular. Because of a need to feel that they are in control of their lives,

\textsuperscript{496} see Richard Kearny. 1998. Op.cit, (ibid., p. 63.)
\textsuperscript{497} see ibid.
people like to think that they not only understand why others behaved as they did in the past and how they behave in the present, but also they like to predict how others will behave in the future. In short, because they interpret the gaze of the 'other' as a potential threat, they spontaneously respond by attempting to reduce the 'other' to the status of a 'thing' - an object that can be understood and whose behaviour can be predicted. However, for Sartre, as it is for Vico, because the attributes attached to the notion of the other arise not from private introspection but from the experience of being in the world with others, such attributes are always imagined, and always unreliable.

Conclusion

Vico’s history of humankind is the history of the origin of ideas. The challenge Vico sets himself, and philosophy, is that of deconstructing the ideas or concepts that form not alone the very fabric of human institutions, but also the ideas and concepts that form the very fabric our own human identity. Unless we allow our most deeply held beliefs to be disturbed, deconstructed and, where necessary, dissolved, maintains Vico, we cannot say with any conviction that that which holds either society or our selves together as a cohesive unit has any value. It might be said that for Vico, as for Socrates, the unexamined life is not worth living. Moreover, even when values of worth, societal or of self, are formed it must be recognised that they are not values etched in stone, but values which arise to meet the demands and needs of a particular age.
Chapter 6. Vico, Joyce, Beckett

Introduction

In the last chapter we looked at some postmodern thinkers whose work bears testimony to the fact that many of those characteristics that are associated with postmodern philosophy were anticipated by the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico two hundred years before those characteristics fully permeated the consciousness of contemporary thinkers. Although, according to Ihab Hassan, ‘the evidence of postmodern literature is quarrelsome, abundant, various [and]... impossible to survey’, amongst those he counts as ‘rare spirits of the age’ whose consciousness is permeated by Vico’s thought, are James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. This chapter, then, by way of emphasising Vico’s ‘postmodern’ approach, now turns to consider the influence of his philosophy on just two of Literature’s, as well as Ireland’s, most recognised postmodern writers, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett.

Vico and Joyce

Although James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) is acknowledged as ‘one of the first major literary utterances in the modern period’, what is not acknowledged is that many of the elements that are now associated with postmodernism appear in Joyce’s book. One of the most immediately identifiable of these elements is his flagrant and unapologetic borrowing of other texts. For instance, while it is well known that the form or structure of *Ulysses* follows, if somewhat...
loosely, the travels of the hero of Homer’s *Odyssey*, it is less well known that the structure of this novel, and of Joyce’s later work, *Finnegans Wake*, rely heavily on the structure of Giambattista Vico’s *New Science*. For the content of *Ulysses*, Joyce exploits a plethora of sources. For example, for characterisation he ‘borrows’ the personalities of many of his family, friends, acquaintances, and colleagues: Stephen Dedalus is James Joyce himself; Simon Dedalus, Stephen’s father, is James’ father John Stanislaus Joyce; ‘Stately, plump Buck Whaley’ is St John Gogarty; the ‘Citizen’ in the ‘Cyclops’ episode is Michael Cusack, co-founder of the Gaelic Athletic Association; Bella Cohen, a madam who Stephen visits at No. 81 Lower Tyrone Street (later renamed as Railway Street), is based on a real Dublin madam who lived at the same address, and Molly Bloom, wife of protagonist and Odysseus doppelgänger Leopold Bloom, is Joyce’s wife Nora Barnacle. The language of the various episodes (literally the words used in each episode) is also drawn from many different sources. For example, the language of ‘Aeolus’, the episode in which the action takes place in the editorial offices of *The Evening Telegraph*, is journalistic; the language of ‘Nausicaa’, where Bloom is attracted to the flawed beauty, Gerty McDowell, is taken from women’s romantic fiction, while the description of Gerty: ‘The waxen pallor of her face was spirited in its ivory-like purity, though her rosebud mouth was a genuine Cupid’s bow, Greekly perfect. Her hands were finely veiled alabaster with

504 see ibid., p. 39
tapering fingers and a white as lemonjuice and queen of ointments... is a Petrarchan blazon cataloguing the attributes of the ideal woman.

In his essay ‘Ulysses, Order and Myth’, T.S. Eliot says ‘... in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporary and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him’. What Eliot could not say is that many of the ‘others’ that must pursue this method would be known as postmodernists. What he also does not say is that the ‘parallel between contemporary and antiquity’ had been employed some centuries earlier by one of Joyce’s main influences, Giambattista Vico.

James Joyce was first taken by the corso-ricorso philosophy of Giambattista Vico whilst living in Trieste. Indeed, so taken was Joyce with the Italian philosopher’s work that he claimed that his imagination grew whenever he read Vico. Richard Ellman, Joyce’s biographer, reports that Joyce maintained that Vico’s theory

... had amply demonstrated itself in his [own] life, and quite possibly he saw himself as having begun [with] a fear of God, then basking in family and personal pride, and, finally, dispossessed, discovering a sufficient value in the ordinary and unassuming.

In a letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver on 21 May 1926 Joyce himself wrote,

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506 T.S. Eliot: ‘Ulysses, Order and Myth’ in The Dial. 1923, pp. 480-3
I do not know if Vico has been translated. I would not pay over much attention to these theories, beyond using them for all they are worth, but they have gradually forced themselves on me through circumstances of my own life.509

Samuel Beckett, in his first ever published work, ‘Dante... Bruno. Vico. Joyce’,510 also draws attention to Vico’s influence on Joyce, where, following a lengthy description of Vico’s *New Science*, he announces,

This social and historical cyclical classification is clearly adapted by Mr Joyce as a structural convenience – or inconvenience... By structural I do not only mean a bold outward division, a bare skeleton for the housing of material. I mean the endless substantial variation on these three beats, and interior intertwining of these three themes into a decoration of arabesques – decoration and more than decoration.511

Beckett goes on to explain how *Finnegans Wake* follows the Vichean structure, starting with the first institution, religion – ‘a mass of dark shadow’; then ‘the love game of children’, which corresponds to Vico’s second institution, marriage and the heroic age. The third part of *Wake* is passed in sleep, that is, burial and the age of men. And finally, in part four the day begins again – *ricorso*. William York Tindall in his *A Reader’s Guide to Joyce*, also reminds us that ‘Joyce

508 ibid.
510 the dots between the names signify the number of centuries between the different authors
called up the system of Giambattista Vico...who found history cyclical'. 512 In Finnegans Wake, says Tindall, ‘[t]he creative father, the quarrelling sons, and the renovating mother of Earwicker’s household fit this [Vico’s] pattern nicely – or, rather, Vico’s pattern nicely fits Earwicker’s family process’. 513 And, quoting from Finnigans Wake, Tindall draws our attention to a passage which reads: ‘The Vico road goes round and round to meet where terms begin’. 514

James Joyce, then, read New Science and discovered a paradigm that could be adapted and modified to his own historical schema. The sheer range and depth of Vico’s work presented him with a ready-to-hand literary, philosophical, and historical space within which he could create his own ‘monomyth’. 515 For example, in Finnegans Wake the giant, Tim Finnegan (representing the bestioni, or savage giants, of Vico’s age of gods), dies after falling from a ladder (as a child a similar accident had brought Vico to the edge of death), he is succeeded by the heroic patriarch Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, or HCE (the age of heroes), who, in turn, is succeeded by his very human twin sons, Shem and Shaun in an age which inevitably turns to chaos, which is, of course, a prelude to the ricorso.

Like Vico’s New Science, Finnegans Wake is divided into four large parts which represent the age of gods, the age of heroes, the age of men, and the period of renewal. Within these four parts are seventeen chapters, each of which corresponds to each of Vico’s ages. Chapter one, ‘The Fall of Man’ centres on primitive and religious age. The second chapter, based on Vico’s ‘heroic

512 Tindall, William York: A Reader’s Guide to James Joyce (London: Thames and Hudson. 1959) p.244
513 ibid.
514 ibid., p. 452
age’, deals with the conflict which arises between Tim Finnegan and Shem, otherwise known as ‘The Cad’. Shem is the name of one of Naoh’s sons, who Vico argues, after the Flood rejected his father’s religion to wander in the forests of the earth. Chapter three, from Vico’s ‘age of men’, is entitled ‘Gossips and the Knocking at the Gate’ and concerns the sin and fall of its central character Earwicker. In chapter four, Vico’s ricorso, HCE, becomes a fox and is hunted by the pack. Every fourth chapter, in turn, ends with ALP, HCE’s wife, who, as the principle of renewal, must preside over each ricorso. It is she who, after HCE’s demise (dissolution), protects his grave, and she who will reawaken him.

Joyce explicitly acknowledges his debt to Vico for the elaborate structure of Ulysses in the complicated schema of a Work in Progress he sent to Carlo Linati in September 1920, and in another he later sent to Stuart Gilbert. According to these schemata, episodes Telemachus and Calypso correspond with Vico’s ‘age of the gods’ in that the language is theocratic and the focus is religion; the Nestor and Lotus Eaters episodes coincide with New Science’s ‘age of heroes’ in which the language is theocratic and the protagonists aristocratic (heroic), while episodes Proteus and Hades deal with the ‘age of men’ in which the language is democratic, wisdom is sympathetic, and ricorso inevitable.

516 Vico. NS, paras, 139-143
517 see Tindall Op.cit. (ibid., pp, 269-272)
519 ibid.
Michael Seidel, in his *Epic Geography, James Joyce's Ulysses*, confirms Joyce's use of Vichean ideas when he draws attention to the bodily language of *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses* when he says,

A powerful description of the bodily world of nature that may have influenced Joyce's vision of Molly Bloom and Anna Livia appears in Giambattista Vico's *New Science*. In his second book, *Poetic Wisdom*, Vico considers what he calls Poetic Cosmography. He writes of the linguistic progress from one visual form to another, from geographical contours of the earth to the curves of a woman's body. Language accommodates the shapes of nature.\(^{520}\)

Thus, not only does Joyce follow Vico by attributing characteristics of animate substances to physical objects (as in the case of the first poets), but also in the use expressions of physical objects as metaphors for the human body and its parts. For example, in *Ulysses*, Seidel explains, 'Molly Bloom, born on Gibraltar, builds her narration on the rotating rock of her own body',\(^{521}\) and in *Finnegans Wake* Anna Livia Plurabelle is not only 'body, woman, [and] wife',\(^{522}\) but also a metaphor for the River Liffey.

\(^{521}\) ibid.
\(^{522}\) ibid.

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Vico and Beckett

While the influence of the philosophy of Vico on James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* is well documented, what is not generally recognised is the influence of the same philosopher on the work of Joyce's friend and contemporary, Samuel Beckett. That Beckett was familiar with Vico's philosophy is indubitable, for his very first published work, written at Joyce's request, was the aforementioned essay 'Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce' (the dots between the names signifies the difference in centuries between the different authors). In his essay Samuel Beckett goes to some lengths to summarise Vico's *New Science* and to show this work was taken by Joyce as a structure for his *Work in Progress.* However, one can go further and argue that Beckett's interest in Vico was not simply to explain his influence on Joyce, and argue that in his own work it is also possible to see how Beckett borrowed from the Italian philosopher to present with a vision of a postmodern and post-nuclear world — a world, that is, that bears a striking resemblance to Vico's period of dissolution.

Vico's 'Endgame'

For Vico the history of humankind is not a process in which each phase succeeds the other in a gradual but ever improving process which culminates in the ideal, rather it is a cyclical process, a *corso-ricorso*, which inevitably dissolves in chaos before returning to its original, barbaric state. At which point the entire process begins anew. The beginning of the end, that is, the point or phase in history where regression begins — what might be called Vico's 'Endgame', is during the age of men, which is also the age of reason. In this age, which begins with such faith in the
power of reason to know and control not only the natural world, but also the self, religion is gradually replaced by secularism and communal responsibility by egoism. During this period societies become fragmented and, in time, people develop a sense of isolation, alienation, and fear. In short, the age inevitably moves towards a state of chaos and dissolution. In Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* – a play which Keith Hopper describes as Beckett’s ‘favourite play’ as well as a ‘drama… reflecting the condition of postmodernity’[^524] - Beckett, borrowing from Vico, presents us with such a concept of the state of the affairs of men. That is, he presents a scene in which the protagonists, Hamm, Clov, Nag and Nell, are not only isolated from the world, but also, for the most part, from each other. In other words, in their world they too have been reduced to exist in a state of fear and alienation – a state of apathy and chaos.

For Beckett, as for Giambattista Vico, mythical gods and heroes such as Zeus, Hercules or Achilles were not simply literary devices ‘employed to impress in coded form the teachings of philosophers on such subjects as ethics, physics, or politics’,[^525] nor were they once real men upon whom these myths were built. Rather these ‘poetic characters’ were concrete manifestations of abstract ideas. That is, they were mythical characters or heroes, constructed by ancient poets, which represented true ‘examples of a primitive, concrete, anthropomorphic mode of thought’:[^526] poetic embodiments of the values, customs and beliefs of primitive communities. In other words, they were not literary devices constructed to tell people how they ought to

[^526]: ibid.

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behave, but representations of how people actually did behave. For Vico, the poet is the true chronicler of the development of human consciousness. For it is the poet, as a conduit through which the judgements and values of society are channelled and interpreted, who best reveals the true characteristics of the age. In *Endgame*, we see that in the same way that Vico’s ancient poets used poetic characters to represent the customs, behaviour and beliefs of the people at a particular place and time in the ideal eternal history of humankind, so too do Beckett’s ‘poetic characters’, Clov, Hamm, Nag and Nell, represent the nature, customs, and behaviour of human beings in the postmodern age.

By concentrating his gaze primarily on the interplay between Clov and Hamm, an interplay in which the protagonists represent two opposing kings during the ‘endgame’ in the game of chess, each countering the other’s moves, neither gaining sufficient advantage to make that final incisive move that would allow one to gain mastery over the other, Beckett draws attention to the sense of fear and anxiety that, for Vico, is an integral part of the human condition during this period of dissolution. This depth of feeling of anguish is reflected in Hamm’s fear that, ultimately, Clov may abandon him – an anguish which is compounded by the fact that Clov may find within himself the strength to make a life for himself in the outside world. For even in their present state, with Nell and Nag, there remains the, albeit dying, fragments of a community. For Clov the feelings of anxiety and loneliness manifest themselves in the gnawing fear that outside the room there is nothing but a void. These feelings represent Beckett’s critique of Cartesianism, for, as Keith Hopper explains:

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Beckett]... was notoriously sceptical about the claims of rationality as well as an all-governing discourse. He had himself after careful study rejected the account of human existence given by the Western philosophical tradition, especially as it based itself on Descartes, who had asserted *cogito, ergo sum*: I think, therefore I am. 527

Thus, like Vico, Beckett held that the Cartesian concept of a reasoning homunculus which contemplates 'clear and distinct ideas' is erroneous (Vico would say that it is a 'conceit'). The world of *Endgame*, then, can be interpreted as a metaphor for a world in which the ideal eternal history of humankind is reaching its nadir - the stage just before it finally dissolves and primitive religion re-emerges from the ashes of reason. Describing those of this phase of human history, Vico says:

... like beasts [they]... are accustomed to think of nothing but their personal advantage, and are prone to irritability, or rather pride, so that they are fitted with bestial rage and resentment at the least provocation. Although their bodies are densely crowded together, their intentions and desires are separated. Like wild beasts, no two or three of them agree, because each pursues his own pleasure or caprice.

... *di bestie si erano accostumati di non pensare ch’alle particolari propie utilità di ciascuno ed avevano dato nell’ultimo della dilicatezza o, per me’ dir, dell’orgoglio, a guisa di fieri, che, nell’essere disgustate d’un pelo, si risentono e s’infieriscono, e sì,
In *Endgame*, Beckett, echoing Vico, presents us with such a scenario: a scenario of a world in which the aged and infirm (Nag and Nell) have become little more than living corpses whose continuing existence is both an irritation and an inconvenience to others. An age too when human beings succumb to a Hamm and Clov mentality and engage in petty, whimsical, and self-gratifying mind games in which each attempts to gain control over the other. An age in which the acts of violence and injustice perpetrated by ‘men of reason’ surpasses even those of primitive man. Thus, like the ‘poetical characters’ created by Vico’s theological poets, Beckett’s protagonists do not express coded philosophical or pedagogical messages, nor do they attempt to represent people as mythical heroes, rather they are ‘empirical illustrations’ of ‘philosophical abstractions’. That is, they are concrete modes of thought which represent the consensus of particular people, in a particular place, and at a particular time, in the history of humankind.

Conclusion

Because of the predominance of Cartesian rationalism during Vico’s lifetime his *New Science* sank, almost without trace. Notwithstanding the fact that decades after his death, his history of ideas has not only been admired and developed by other philosophers, but has anticipated a
movement that would emerge almost two centuries later as postmodernism, Vico has remained a peripheral figure in the Western philosophical and literary canon. Given that one can add to the list of people who share Vico's approach such postmodern luminaries as Joyce and Beckett it seems that the time is apposite to acknowledge Vico's contribution to philosophy and to literature.
Chapter 7. Vico’s ‘Deconstruction’ of ‘Grand Narratives’

Introduction

As shown above, the recurring theme of postmodernism, and of Vico’s New Science is that all worldviews, since they are made by men, can be deconstructed, dismantled, and demystified by men. Continuing this approach, this chapter turns to examine more specifically how Vico employs these characteristics in his treatment of ‘grand narratives’ or universal concepts. In particular it will discuss Vico’s deconstruction of the legend of Homer, of the ‘true narrative’ of Adam, and of Descartes’ cogito.

Vico’s ‘Deconstruction’ of the ‘True Homer’

For Vico the myths and legends of ancients were actual accounts of representations of their indigenous value systems. In section two of the New Science, ‘Discovery of the True Homer’ (‘Della Discorverta del Vero Omero’), Vico declares that the works of Homer are not the work of one man, but the accumulation of many years of wisdom of the entire Greek people. ‘Homer’, says Vico, ‘was a purely ideal poet who in fact never existed as an individual’, (‘Omero fusse stato un poeta d’idea, il quale non fu particolar di lui in natura’). Cecelia Miller informs us that the section on the true Homer is actually taken from a short piece Vico had written in 1728-29 concerning Dante. The principle reason Vico changes to Homer, says Miller, is that he wanted

\[530\] Vico. NS, para, 780
\[531\] Ibid., para, 873.
to discuss mythology rather than a particular living person.\textsuperscript{532} Miller goes on to say that there is a strong argument that many of the conclusions Vico reaches of Homer in the final edition of \textit{New Science}, carry a striking resemblance to the direction he was heading in his discussions of Moses in the 1725 edition of \textit{New Science}.\textsuperscript{533} It seems that while Vico may have changed the example of his non-historical icon from Moses to Dante, and then to Homer in order to avoid investigation by the Church authorities, he did not do so without daring to leave certain clues for those who cared to follow the trail. The view that such a trail exists is shared by Frederick Vaughan who, in his \textit{The Political Philosophy of Giambattista Vico}, suggests that the only possible reason that Vico’s heresy was not detected by the Church authorities is that ‘... most of those who read the \textit{New Science} took Vico at his word and did not bother to challenge his expressed orthodoxy by a careful reading of the book’.\textsuperscript{534} Although those who did take the time to peruse the text of the \textit{New Science} in depth were quick to charge Vico with making providence so immanent that it was impossible to distinguish it from the course of nature, says Vaughan, he ‘nonetheless remained free from prosecution and had the official approval of his ecclesiastical superiors to the very end’.\textsuperscript{535}

Miller’s suggestion that Vico may have changed his notion of Moses to Homer in order to avoid accusations of heresy is supported by Vaughan who also suggests that Vico’s criticism of Homer draws its influence from Spinoza’s criticism of the Bible.\textsuperscript{536} According to Vaughan, although

\textsuperscript{532} see Miller. Op.cit (ibid., p 770
\textsuperscript{533} ibid.
\textsuperscript{534} ibid.
\textsuperscript{535} Vaughan. Op.cit. (ibid., p.44)
\textsuperscript{536} see ibid.
Spinoza accepted the moral value of the Bible, in the same way that Vico later argued that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had been misinterpreted, so did Spinoza hold that the two books of the Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament, been ‘hopelessly misunderstood and weighed down by acquired superstition’. And in the same way that Spinoza makes the case that the Bible was the record of the Jewish race, Vico argues that Homer’s epic poems are really the true histories of the Greek people. According to Vaughan, the principal intention of Vico’s treatment of Homer was twofold: (i), to indicate the true nature of the epic poems [the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*] as ‘containing crude and poetic history’ and (ii) to show ‘that the critique of those two books might be applied with equal success to the two “books” of Christian religion, i.e. the Old Testament and the New Testament’. However, if we accept the view put forward by Miller and Vaughan that Vico’s critique of Homer and his epics had been originally intended for Moses and the two books of the Bible, in the light of the prevailing mood in Naples at that time, it is understandable that Vico would have chosen to change the subject matter of this particular thesis from one whose tradition was closely related to that of his time, to one firmly rooted in pagan tradition.

**Vico’s ‘deconstruction’ of the ‘true narrative’ of Adam**

According to Vico, for pagans, human generation began when the earliest people, more beast than human, ‘in fear of divinity’ (*col timore della divinità*), formed themselves into civilised communities. Up until this time the *bestioni* had lived freely and openly, engaging in sexual

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537 ibid., p. 47
538 ibid
539 ibid
540 ibid., p. 46
unions without any sense of responsibility for their acts, without commitment, without a sense of shame, and without fear of retribution from any omniscient or omnipotent deity. It was only when it was believed that these acts evoked the anger of the gods that they were abandoned for a more ordered existence. As Vico says, it was only when the early peoples' free and open way of living was interrupted by the roar of thunder and the flash of lightning that they were 'shaken and roused by a terrible fear of Uranus and Jupiter, gods they had invented and embraced' ('scosse e destate da un terribile spavento d'una da essi stessi finita e creduta divinità del Cielo e di Giove')\textsuperscript{541} that the bestioni begin to live in specific shelters, with specific partners, and raise the children they produce as their own.\textsuperscript{542} It was at this stage of human history that the transformation from the man-beast to human began; and it was this transformation that gave rise to the expression 'humanum genus, or human race'.\textsuperscript{543} However, where human generation for pagans began the when fear of an imagined deity caused the bestioni to form monogamous relationships, beget children whom they recognised and treated as their own, and establish social institutions, Vico reminds us that, for Christians, and Jews of the time, the father of the human race is Adam. According to Genesis, the process of human generation began when Adam and Eve, who lived freely and without shame until a time when their behaviour aroused the wrath of God, were cast into the wilderness where, 'with the help of the Lord', Eve, impregnated by Adam, gave birth to Cain, and afterwards his brother Abel.\textsuperscript{544}

\textsuperscript{540} Vico, NS, para, 13
\textsuperscript{541} ibid.
\textsuperscript{542} see ibid.
\textsuperscript{543} ibid.
While, in the *New Science*, Vico explicitly contrasts the Christian version of the origin of human generation with the pagan version, implicit is his view that the story in Genesis is not alone a myth, but a story akin that of the pagans in miniature. This becomes clear where, in his *New Science*, he says that since Christians believe that the first people of the world descended from Adam, the first project of his new science must be the study of myths.\(^{545}\) This view is endorsed where Vico explains that the term myth or fable can also be defined as true narration ("*vera narratio*").\(^{546}\) However, by ‘true narration’ Vico does not mean that such narratives are true in an absolute or universal sense, but representations of the common sense judgements of the majority of the community peculiar to particular times in the history of humankind. Thus, when Vico tells us that, for Christians, Adam represents ‘the perfect image in which God has created him’ (‘[*I*]’idea ottima essere stato creato da Dio’),\(^{547}\) we realise that the story of the origin of human generation in Genesis is a myth. Indeed, for Vico it is a myth derived from a myth. That is, it is the interpretation of a myth already popular ‘in all nations, both Greek and barbarian’ (‘*che le nazioni, o greche o barbare*’),\(^{548}\) which became condensed into the narrative of a process initiated by a single person, and crystallised in Christian consciousness as the ‘true narrative’. However, since this ‘true narrative’ has been created by men, it is a narrative that can be deconstructed by men.

\(^{545}\) see Vico, NS, para, 51

\(^{546}\) see ibid, para, 401

\(^{547}\) Vico. NS, para, 310
Vico’s ‘deconstruction’ of Descartes’ *Cogito*

In his *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, Vico sets about laying the ghost in Descartes’ human machine. Vico believed that Descartes’ claim that the *Cogito, ergo sum* was the first absolutely indubitable truth was typical of the kind of assertions being made by modern thinkers. And because these assertions were held to be indubitable, Vico held that Descartes metaphysics fell under the rubric of dogma. It was Descartes, having rejected any empirical and rational element of consciousness that can be doubted, concluded that the *cogito* alone remains the only truth that can be said to be without doubt clear and distinct. From this primary truth he also determines the truth of the existence of God. According to Vico, Descartes’ systematic method fails to refute scepticism. Although he accepts that he cannot doubt that he thinks, or that he exists while he is thinking, ‘thinking is... only a sign that one has a mind, but it is not its cause’. For Vico, Descartes had mistaken a common psychological experience for a scientific principle. Vico held that it was important to distinguish between the psychological experience of certainty and what can actually be determined as unquestionably true: between *certum* and *verum*. Where Descartes makes one coextensive with the other, Vico distinguishes between the two. In response to Descartes’ claim that because one is thinking one knows that one exists, Vico argues, that if one knew that one existed one would know the mode and genus of one’s existence and thus would be able to make oneself. Because one exists as mind and body, thinking would have to be the cause not only of the mind, but also of the body. Yet, says Vico,

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549 see ibid., para, 125
550 see Flint: Op.cit. (ibid., p. 91)
551 see ibid.
553 see ibid., p. 22
... there are bodies that do not think. Rather, it is because I consist of both body and mind that I think; so that body and mind united are the cause of thought. For if I were only body, I would not think. If I were only mind, I would have [pure] intelligence. In fact, thinking is a sign, and not a cause, of my being mind. But the sure sign (techmerium) is not the cause, for the clever sceptic will not deny that certainty of sure [rational] signs, but just the certainty of causes.553

Atqui sunt corpora, quae non cogitant. Quin, quia corpore et mente consto, ea propter cogito; ita ut corpus et mens unita sint cogitationis caussa: nam, si ego solum corpus essem, non cogitarem; sin sola mens, intelligerem. Enimvero cogitare non est caussa quod sim mens, sed signum; atqui techmerium caussa non est; techmeriorum enim certitudinem cordatus scepticus non negaverit, caussarum vero negaverit.554

Vico applies a similar argument to Descartes’ proof of the existence of God. Those who seek God in this way, he maintains, do so out of their own stupidity.555 In order to know that God exists, he says, one would have to know the genus and mode of God; that is, one would have to be the maker of God. Those who attempt to prove the existence of God a priori, he says, are

553 ibid.
555 ibid., p.132
'guilty of impious curiosity. For to do this would be the equivalent of making themselves the
God of God and denying the God whom they seek'.

Careful that his argument remains within the remit of the Church authorities, Vico next sets out
to convince that his deconstruction of Descartes' proof of the existence of God does not indicate
that he harbours heretical thoughts. While some of Descartes' critics (the sceptics) concede that
effects have their own causes, he says, they deny that they know the ultimate or first cause of
causes – 'the first truth'. However, he continues, Christians are privileged with the knowledge
that this first cause is God. Being the first truth it must by definition comprehend all causes; and
because it comprehends all, it must be prior to the body. Hence, it must be spiritual. And since it
is spiritual, it follows that it must be God. However, having posited his argument against
sceptics, and having tipped his forelock to the Church authorities, Vico concludes with the
reminder that 'of course, those truths are human truths, which we contain within ourselves, and
which we project ad infinitum (to infinity) through postulates; and when we combine them we
make the truth that, by combining them, we know'. That is, for Vico, human knowledge is the
action of bringing together the elements of what we perceive to make up an object of knowledge.
As L.M. Palmer explains, for Vico, 'human knowledge in its activity is involved only with the
"outside of things"'. For example, unlike Descartes, who held that mathematical truths exist a
priori, Vico held that there are no purely objective or absolute truths that exist outside the human

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556 ibid., p. 65
557 ibid., p. 56
558 ibid.
559 ibid., p. 57
mind. Although he held mathematics was the purest science it is always a science created by the human mind. As Robert Flint explains,

\[\text{[According to Vico] mathematical truth is not known by the mind in a pure and infinite act of intellectum... but... in an all-penetrative, all-comprehensive manner, as precisely what it is; and it is thus known because it is precisely what the mind which knows it has made it to be.}\]

Thus, ‘[w]e demonstrate geometrical truths because we make them’ (\textit{geometrica ideo demonstramus, quia facimus}). In the same way that geometricians determine the point from which all things are measured, maintains Vico, so do metaphysicians decide the point from which all causes originate. For geometricians this point is one. For metaphysicians the first point is the first mover – God. However, because human knowledge is always limited, and within its limitations constructs its own paradigms, all that it can do is to arrange the elements of the paradigm it creates, and because it arranges the elements it is the cause of the paradigm – it makes it. For Vico, the ability to formulate clear and distinct ideas is a faculty that emerges only after the mind has undergone a long and arduous journey that begins with sensory experience. It is not the case that ‘I think, therefore I am!’, infers Vico, rather it is that ‘I am, therefore I think!’.

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\textsuperscript{561} see Flint: Op.cit (ibid., p. 99)  \\
\textsuperscript{562} ibid., p. 100  \\
\textsuperscript{563} ibid., p. 65  \\
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Conclusion

Giambattista Vico describes his *New Science* as a natural theogony.\(^{565}\) By this he means not only that the ideas or concepts of gods arose from early men’s ‘vigorouss sensations and vivid imaginations’ (‘robusti sensi e vigorossime fantasie’),\(^{566}\) but that concepts of first principles, also ‘began when the first men began to think in human fashion’ (‘cominciò d’allora ch’i primi uomini cominciarono a umanamente pensare’).\(^{567}\) To argue that Vico’s concept that there are no universal truths is itself based on the first principle is not only facile, given the seriousness of the argument, but it also misses Vico’s central point. That is, that *all* concepts, even his concept of an ideal eternal history of humankind, are imagined. Indeed, he undermines his own version of history where he declares that his ideal eternal history of humankind is at odds with John Marsham’s *Canon of Egyptian, Jewish, and Greek Chronology*, \(^{568}\) whose account is rejected by Herman Wits in his *Comparison of Jewish and Egyptian Rites*, a view that in turn is refuted in the *Annals* of Tacitus.\(^{569}\)

In the tale ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis, Tertius’, contained in his book *Labyrinths*, postmodernist writer Jorge Luis Borges presents us with the concept of a world called Tlön: a world in which the ‘truths’ which govern society are created by astronomers, engineers, biologists, geometricians, and metaphysicians. For Borges, Tlön is ‘a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth devised by men, [and thus] a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men’\(^{570}\)

Implicit in Borges’ tale is the postmodernist view that since all grand narratives are devised by men, they should be deciphered by men. Two centuries earlier we find that the same view is

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\(^{565}\) Vico. NS, para, 7
\(^{566}\) ibid., para, 375
\(^{567}\) ibid.
\(^{568}\) see ibid., para, 44
\(^{569}\) ibid.
implicit in Vico’s dismantling of the legend of Homer, his deconstruction of the ‘true narrative’ of the origin of human generation, and his critique of Descartes’ cogito.

Giambattista Vico, in virtue of his eclectic interests and his unorthodox education came to the conclusion that much that was being promoted as unquestionable by his ‘modern’ contemporaries was anything but unquestionable. Notwithstanding the fact that the British bishop Gilbert Burnett, on a visit to Italy in 1685 concluded that ‘there were societies at Naples of freer thought than could be found in any other place in Italy’ they were not so free as to privilege their associates with the freedom to challenge the status quo with impunity. In a Naples tensed by the Inquisition, Vico, faced with the dilemma of formatting his philosophy in a manner that would neither offend the Church authorities, curtail his own academic ambitions, or have a negative impact on his family, as a master of rhetoric at the university of Naples, chose to present his polemic against moderns in a format which he called his ‘new science’. The ‘discoveries’ that Vico’s method unearthed took twenty years of sustained study. What this means is that rather than being a passive recipient of the accepted wisdom of his time, Vico set out on a forensic study of the origin of all received ‘wisdoms’. In virtue of his research Vico came to the view that all systems of belief are paradigms made by man. That is, they arose from humankind’s need to understand the world of nature, its place in this world, and the energy or force that animates this world. Because the conclusions arrived at in this way were essentially humankind’s imagined views of what was happening in the world, it follows, says Vico, that these views were in fact myths made by men for men. And because these myths accorded with the common sense conclusions of the majority, they were taken to be absolute or universal truths:

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truths which would hold in all eventualities and across all time. One of the most powerful of these beliefs was that behind all natural phenomena lies a supernatural force with anthropomorphic characteristics: a force that can embrace those who follow the truths attributed to this force, or reject those who do not behave in accordance with its truths, and a force that can exhibit its displeasure by incurring suffering on those who disobey the laws contrived from these truths. Those who attempted to deconstruct these truths were looked on as offenders of the faith and dangers to the community. In the period leading up to and during Vico's time, anyone displaying such tendencies was held to account by the Inquisition or the Index of Prohibited Books. During this time the term employed for one who sought to distort these 'truths' was 'heresy'. In contemporary society the term employed is 'postmodernism'.

Although Vico's work made little impact during his own lifetime, decades after his death his history of philosophy has been admired and developed, and has had a profound influence on many subsequent thinkers. During a period when moderns were arguing that human nature was a constant; that human goals and standards were essentially the same for all people at all times; and that knowledge was already within us as innate ideas, Vico remained a lone voice crying out that this approach was too severe, too dispassionate, and above all, too homogenised. Contrary to the Cartesian doctrine of a priori knowledge, Vico held that there were no given universal standards. Neither human nature, customs, laws, nor institutions that govern social life, are constants. While he accepted that human history had involved a progressive evolution from primitive cultures to more sophisticated and modern cultures, this was not a permanent, linear...

process, but a process that is cyclical and constantly changing. For Vico, these historical changes did not mean that one period or age was superior to another – only that they were different.

Thus, while moderns were promoting the doctrine that human nature was the same at all times and in all places, Vico was making the case that the laws governing humankind were not absolutes but products of the human mind. Even human nature itself was not constant, but something which demonstrably changed over time. And since this nature was changeable, it follows that, while certain self-evident natural rights and obligations arise within each social grouping, these rights and obligations are not absolutes written in stone, but values and judgements that arise to meet the needs and utilities of each emerging society. Everything associated with civil life has been made by man. The modernist tradition, which overshadowed Vico's philosophy, advocated the view that there was a unity of sciences: that the same kind of laws or principles can be found in each area of inquiry, including human affairs. While there is a view that this approach went relatively unchallenged until the advent of postmodernism this thesis shows that as early as the first quarter of the eighteenth century Giambattista Vico's New Science was challenging this approach. In this work he holds the metanarratives of both the Hebrew/Christian tradition and the Enlightenment tradition up against his own 'rational civil theology' not to show that his way is the other way, but to show it as an other way. Vico's thesis is not a critique of any one grand narrative, rather it is that all grand narratives should be treated with circumspection. From Vico we learn that postmodernist consciousness is not so much a question of historic location but of state of mind.
Whilst the term ‘luddite’, which has come to refer to anyone opposed to the introduction of new technology or methods, was not coined until a century later (1812-18) to describe an opponent of technological change, it is an apposite term to describe not only Vico’s attitude to the moderns but also to grasp the importance of his new science. As Sandra Rudnick Luft explains,

[w]hether they define themselves as Cartesians, they have a Cartesian mentality… whose consciousness has been formed by the pedagogic practices and intellectual structures of modernity… [and] who reduce the world to a “gorgeous mansion” in which humans do no more than “move the furniture around”.

Vico’s own attitude to those who failed to grasp the significance of his anti-modern approach is reflected in the letter he wrote to his friend Father Bernardo Maria Giacco where he describes his magum opus as having ‘gone forth into the desert’ (‘mandato al deserto’). Although he could not know it, the approach Vico called his ‘new science’ would emerge some two centuries later in a movement called postmodernism.

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