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Vico as Epochal Thinker

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1.

A philosophical tradition such as Humanism is not only historically relevant for the comprehension of a given period of Western thought: Humanism is also essential if we want to become aware of our present-day speculative situation. G. B. Vico not only belongs to Humanism, but has indeed rethought it to its most extreme consequences. By inverting the notion of traditional metaphysics—as I wish to demonstrate in this paper—did the great Neapolitan thinker succeed in legitimizing a new approach to the religious problem? As a staunch believer in metaphorical thinking as the primary instance of speculation, and an enemy of traditional ontological metaphysics, where does Vico stand in relation to Heidegger's negation of onto-theological metaphysics?

Insofar as the reappraisal of Humanist thought is concerned—which is also a topic implicit in this paper—one needs be familiar with, in Vico's own words, the *boria dei dotti* [the scholar's conceit] of German idealist and existential metaphysics, which has always denied that the Humanist tradition may have had any speculative

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[*Translated from the Italian by Roberta Piazza*]

importance for the proper understanding of the passion behind such a problematic. Let us not forget that it was Hegel who asserted that "philosophy has survived as a special instance of the German nation" [*dass sie in der deutschen nation als eine Eigentuehmlichkeit sich erhalten hat*], adding: "We have received this supreme profession from nature" [*Wir haben den hoehren Beruf von der Natur erhalten*].[1]

This is very much in line with the answer Heidegger gave me when, in handing me the *Letter on Humanism* for publication (1947), he refused to give me another manuscript of a purely speculative character, saying: "This is a German concern" [*"Nein, das ist eine deutsche Angelegenheit"*].

But let us get back to Vico. A striking feature of this thinker is that his philosophy is not grounded on any *apriori* conception, but rather on the expression of reality in its concrete *historicity*. This element differentiates Vico not only from old traditional metaphysics and Medieval speculation, but also from modern thought beginning with Descartes. However, we would not be dealing thoroughly and in depth with Vico's thought if we started with the statement that the *New Science* is "new" simply because it starts out with the issue of history. It is necessary to investigate how, where, and in relation to what that history originates. Is it determined by "Divine Providence"—as Vico affirms—so that his theory of history takes root in a religious conception of reality?

The starting point in Vico's speculative thought is not the traditional issue of the rational identification of beings or entities, whether subjects or objects, but the problem of the word, specifically the question of the ingenious, fantastic word. The German tradition, with its tendency to *apriori* thinking, was unable to comprehend and fully appreciate Vico's humanistic speculation. In my opinion, Heidegger is the only thinker who could have shed some light on Vico. Unfortunately, blinded by the traditional interpretation of Humanism as essentially a form of Platonism and Neoplatonism, Heidegger took an anti-Humanist position without ever knowing or reading Humanist authors, in particular Vico.[2]

The *epochal* character of Vico's main thesis lies in the notion that metaphysics should start neither with rational principles nor with the issue of beings (as entities), but rather with the *word*, the only element able to reveal human historicity. Vico's work is a real phenomenology, that is, a description of how human reality "appears" [*phainesthai*] step by step. We must also bear in mind that Vico constantly argues with other philosophers about their abstract deductions, thus refusing "what philosophers have

hitherto imagined" (*NS*, § 666).[3] The scholar's conceit [*boria dei dotti*], which Vico mentions repeatedly, is the persistent belief that all institutions and human attitudes have their foundations in a rational metaphysic and that, moreover, knowledge is hidden *behind* myths, fables, and folktales. On the contrary, as will be shown presently, myth itself in its ingenious origins is the primary expression of knowledge. Hence Vico denies that Homer was a philosopher who simply disguised speculation under the veil of poetry. All of Homer's fantastic thinking and writing is not an allegory of an ahistorical truth, but is rather the act of unveiling reality in relation to a concrete historical situation. What we have here is the negation of the Medieval notion of allegory: "We denied that he [Homer] was ever a philosopher" (*NS*, § 836).

Vico firmly believes that the scholar's conceit is responsible for the inability to properly understand the cycle of history, for if rationality is assumed as the only philosophical criterion, then the result is the detachment from the "necessities" of life through which the existent manifests itself. Vico notoriously held that academics and philosophers came last on the tree of knowledge:

> First [were] the woods, then cultivated fields and huts, next little houses and villages, thence cities, finally academies and philosophers: this is the order of all progress from the first origins. (*NS*, § 22)

2.

Vico identifies two tasks of philosophy: nature and human activity. The former is created by God and so can only be comprehended by Him. However, up until now nature has been the object of inquiry in traditional metaphysics and it is precisely this ontological metaphysics that Vico refutes. The "epochal" in Vico's thought consists in his belief that philosophers and philologists should begin with a metaphysics

> which seeks its proofs not in the external world but within the modifications of the mind of him who meditates it. (*NS*, § 374)

Vico's proposed metaphysics does not search for these modifications in reason but in Genius and in Fantasy, both of which render metaphor possible; and since metaphor asserts one thing yet meaning something else, it ends up invalidating the principles of logic: identity, noncontradiction, and the excluded middle.

Vico's central point is to abandon a metaphysics of entities and therefore ontology and to begin with a new one, the object of which would be man's appearance and becoming. This ought not to be understood as an anthropology—which was Heidegger's

erroneous charge against Humanism—but rather as the search in relation to which human history develops (or becomes). For Vico, what is true has no priority over what is certain, i.e., what manifests itself in its historicity. In fact, as he points out, the notion of a fixed, rational, and ahistoric "true" proves to be false in the long run:

> It will be another great labor of this Science to recover these grounds of truth—truth which, with the passage of years and the changes in languages and customs, has come down to us enveloped in falsehood. (*NS*, § 150)

The counterfoisting of the true and the certain is indeed the contraposition of what claims an ahistorical universality with respect to a rational process and what on the contrary reveals itself historically. The study of the certain is then the search for what is always making itself evident, manifesting itself as new in reality. There is an identity of truth and fact:

> In Latin, *verum* (the true) and *factum* (what is made) are interchangeable or, in the language of the Schools, convertible terms.[4]

This conception will radically transform the notion of truth, which will no longer be identified with the rational process but with the "unveiling" of the real in history.

Another of man's ways of "doing" [*fare*] things is the creating of mathematical and geometric worlds, both of which are, however, entirely *formal* since they are based upon fictions, upon unreality:

> Turning this defect of his mind to useful ends, he [man] then invents for himself two things by abstraction, as they call it: the point, which can be drawn, and the unit, which can be multiplied. But both are fictions: for if a point is drawn it ceases to be a point, and if a unit is multiplied it is no longer one. . . . In this way he fashions for himself a world of shapes and numbers, such as can be contained entirely within himself, and by extension . . . he produces an infinite number of works, because the truths he perceives within himself are infinite. (*AWI*, p. 54)

By identifying the true with what is made, Vico *does not aspire to a purely formal world*, implicitly taking *ante litteram* a critical position against any purely formal analytical philosophy. Further on in the same 1710 text, Vico says:

> The most certain things are those which, redressing the defects of their origin, resemble divine knowledge in their operation, inasmuch as in them the true is convertible with what is made. (*AWI*, p. 55)

The task is then that of searching for what is *not formal* in history, for it is there that human capacity is realized. Vico's famous thesis is that in the darkness of night in which humanity was originally enwrapped there appeared an eternal light, that is, the civil world made by men. How, one might ask at this point, does history come about? Is history initiated by Divine Providence? Are we dealing with a new approach to the problem of religion independent of any onto-theological metaphysics?

In interpreting Vico's thought, the starting point is the concept of *necessity*. In order to deal with its urgency, Vico posits the role of Genius as the primary ability to see "what is alike" [*simile*] and as such the origin of ingenious thinking and speaking:

> And since naturally the discovery or invention of things comes before criticism of them, it was fitting that the infancy of the world should concern itself with the operation of the human mind, for the world then had need of all inventions for the necessities and utilities of life, all of which had been provided before the philosophers appeared. . . . (*NS*, § 699)

Such are the *necessities* which were time after time originally perceived as divine commands due to their urgency, and from which Vico goes on to extract a natural theogony. It is here that Vico's "New Critical Art" originates, expressed in the following terms:

> And here, by the principles of this new critical art, we consider at what determinate times and on what particular occasions of human necessity or utility felt by the first men of the gentile world, they, with frightful religions which they themselves feigned and believed in, imagined first such and such gods and then such and such others. (*NS*, § 7)

This originary knowing is theological because

> the crudest gentile humanity thought that all institutions necessary or useful to the human race were deities. (*Ibid.*)

From this stems our need to see and investigate closely the structure of ingenious and inventive thought, in which the act of finding (actually, rediscovering: *ritrovare)* precedes the act of judging.

3.

In *On the Ancient Wisdom of the Italians Taken from the Origins of the Latin Language* [*De Antiquissima . . .*] Vico defines *ingenium*[5] as follows:

> *Ingenium* is the power of connecting separate and diverse elements. The Latins described it as *acutum* [acute] or *obtusum* [obtuse]. . . .Thus, when obtuse, ingenuity links different things more slowly; when acute, it does so more swiftly. (*AWI*, p. 70)

In the *Vindiciae* he holds that

> acuteness of genius . . . moves and joins, in a common relation with a latent truth, things which to the many *(volgo)* appeared to be so different and far from one another. (*Opere*, p. 928)

The theory of *ingenium* with its originary function, together with the priority of ingenious and subtle thinking and speaking, can only be fully comprehended from the perspective of a *Topica* of sensation, that is to say, in relation to those urgencies and needs which are met in the same process that generates the variety of worlds. Ingenious activity can thus be described as the response to *necessità* [necessity]. The originary *Topica* is sensitive and inventive because it is through our senses that originary needs manifest themselves.

Now ingenious activity is originarily expressed through myth. Logic, according to Vico, derives from *logos*, which means word, speech, allowing the thinker to go back to the Greek term *muthos*, which in turn refers to the word as a dumb deictic sign created to meet natural needs. Thus logic has nothing rational in its origin. As Vico says in the *New Science:*

> "Logic" comes from *logos*, whose first and proper meaning was *fabula*, fable, carried over into Italian as *favella*, speech. In Greek the fable was also called *mythos*, myth, whence comes the Latin *mutus*, mute. For speech was born in mute times as a mental [or sign] language . . . [which] existed before vocal or articulate [language]; whence *logos* means both word and idea. (*NS*, § 401)

Mythology, in turn, is the project of a tale, a fable in which action becomes meaningful as praxis, a story in relation to which institutions and characters find their model, the universal and the various genres for the different individuals. With the project inherent in myth, the necessity of place and time is modified accordingly:

myth—to which a religious meaning is attached—is not outside history at all. Rather, it expresses the historicity of each single different era which continually strikes us with the wondrous revelation of always dissimilar worlds. Myth is an allegory, a metaphor not representative of an "other" world outside of history, but rather it is the metaphor for what is realized in history.

Myth itself is a universal because in relation to myth the particular is determined under a time-marking urgency: the project of myth reveals the various ideals—Vico's "fantastic universals"—as those different ideas to which one must conform: a continually changing ideal of courage (for instance: Achilles), of love, patience, and justice. In the project of myth, individuals come to life under a "genre" which is not rational, hence not abstractly fixed upon a world of ahistorical ideas. In the mythical world, institutions are not rational deductions, but rather belong to the tale which corresponds to the needs of the "here" and "now."

When, on the contrary, myth and fantastic universals crystallize, i.e., become frozen and static and claim at the same time to bear a meaning beyond the boundaries of history—when they become "rational"—then the attitudes that correspond to them become dogmatic and are no longer representative of natural needs. Myth and the world it expresses tumble down at this point, followed by a time of renewed barbarity with its load of sorrow, tragedy, and suffering. Vico says, in fact, that

> Mythologies, as their name indicates, must have been the proper languages of the fables; the fables being imaginative class concepts,[6] as we have shown, the mythologies must have been the allegories corresponding to them . . . signifying the diverse species or *the diverse individuals comprised under these genera*. So that they must have a univocal signification connoting a quality common to all their species and individuals (as Achilles connotes an idea of valor common to all strong men, or Ulysses an idea of prudence common to all wise men). (*NS*, § 403) [emphasis added]

The fantastic universal [imaginative class concept in the Bergin-Fisch translation of the *New Science*] is endowed not only with the role of striking the imagination, but also with that of showing how a situation should be faced, in concrete terms. In other words, fantastic universals are genres which include their species; they are not isolated in and by themselves but arise within a given situation expressing itself by means of a fable or a myth. If history begins with fantastic universals, that is to say, with metaphors—such as Godfrey, a metaphor for captain—and if, owing to its

concrete character, the fantastic universal must appear in a finite story (one which begins and ends in itself), then it is always *fabulous*. And if Vico persists in asserting that fantastic universals are determined by *naturali necessità* [natural necessities], then their cogency is the source of myth and history:

> The poetic characters, in which the essence of the fables consists, were born of the need of a nature incapable of abstracting forms and properties from subjects. Consequently they must have been the manner of thinking of entire peoples, who had been placed under this *natural necessity* in the times of their greatest barbarism. (*NS*, § 816)

Myth portrays people, heroes, *characters* on a grand "representational" scale, so that the praxis of myth expresses an exemplary order. Vico reminds us that: "person" [*persona*] means nothing more than "mask" [*maschera*] and that such a word does not derive, as it is often believed, from *persŏnare*, but from *persōnari*,

> a verb which we conjecture meant to wear the skins of wild beasts, which was permitted only to heroes. . . . The poets clothe their heroes in these pelts, and above all Hercules. . . . To such an origin . . . is to be traced . . . the Italian application of the term *personaggi*, personages, to men of high station and great representations. (*NS*, § 1034)

Myth determines praxis which is inclusive of a beginning, a development, and an end. Praxis, then, does not mean an action carried out for the purpose of achieving something else (*poiesis*), but to express through action attitudes and "characters" which disclose an order. On this basis, Vico maintains that ancient jurisprudence was a severe form of theological poetry, a serious poem which the Romans used to perform at the forum.

4.

In order to explore further Vico's notion of myth, perhaps we can turn to Aristotle, who formulates his version of what myth is together with the definition of tragedy in the *Poetics*. Aristotle accurately lists six constitutive moments of tragedy (*Poetics* 1449 b 49):

1. Staging [*kosmos opseos*], which is the visual world in which the action takes place
2. Rhythm

3. The word [*lexis*]
4. The spirit of the characters [*ethos*]
5. The ideas
6. Myth, that is, the fable or the story itself

Aristotle explicitly says that *only myth* can represent the praxis of tragedy, and not thought, characters, or words. Moreover, Aristotle's definition of tragedy is *mimesis tes praxeos* (1448 a 1). So, if myth is the essence of tragedy and tragedy the imitation of praxis, then one needs to be familiar with Aristotle's notion of praxis based on two radically different forms of action: *poiesis* and *praxis*. The former aims to reach an external target and is over once it achieves the desired result: the act of building a house becomes useless the very moment the house is built. This act then is poietic because it is only a way of carrying out something which is not an end in itself, but concerns something else. As he writes in the *Metaphysics:*

> Those actions that end with the attainment of the purpose are never really an end but only a means to attain an end . . . therefore they cannot be recognized as praxis . . . as authentic praxis can be considered only those actions whose end is contained within itself. (*Metaphysics,* 1048 b 18)

Now if we turn to the *Poetics,* we find the following assertion:

> We have established that a tragedy is the imitation of an action which is whole and complete (tragodian teleias kai holes praxeos einai mimesin) and also a certain size (echouses ti megethos). . . . "Whole" means having a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning, while not necessarily followed by something else, is, by definition, followed by something else. The end, on the contrary, follows something else by definition . . . but nothing else comes after it. (*Poetics,* 1450 b 21 [G. M. A. Grube trans.])

Myth, which is the foundation and essence of tragedy, is therefore a story, a fable with a beginning, a middle, and an end, beyond which there is nothing else; it is a whole, a development that is fully enclosed within itself. Being the tale of an action, of praxis, myth is different from the poietic act carried out in order to realize something else. On the contrary, myth is the manifestation and revelation of a world with an end in itself, with its own ideas, characters, beginning, and end: a concluded system.

The belief that historical principles are not rational but mythical and fabulous determines the *epochal* aspect of Vico's thought

vis-à-vis traditional metaphysics as well as Cartesian rationalism and German idealist metaphysics. "The first sages of the Greek world were the theological poets," says Vico in the *New Science* (§ 199), and immediately after that: "All barbarian histories have fabulous beginnings" (*NS*, § 202), where fabulous is here understood precisely in the sense of theological poetry. The earliest wise men were the theological poets because they created myths in which the story expressed the needs of a given historical period. Owing to its metaphoric character, this theology is actually poetry:

> Now this is the threefold labor of great poetry: 1) to invent sublime fables suited to the popular understanding; 2) to perturb to excess, with a view to the end proposed; and 3) to teach the vulgar to act virtuously, as the poets have taught themselves. (*NS*, § 376)

The epochal aspect of Vico's thought becomes even more apparent in the following passage:

> [Because] as rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them [*homo intelligendo fit omnia*], this imaginative metaphysics [*metafisica fantasticata*] shows that man becomes all things by *not* understanding them [*homo non intelligendo fit omnia*]; and perhaps the latter proposition is truer than the former, for when man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them. (*NS*, § 405)

If metaphor and myth express natural needs, then metaphoric language, rich in fantastic elements, is originary and precise, unlike the abstruse language of rational metaphysics, which gets entangled with and lost in the web of abstract ahistorical concepts. We can then say, with Vico, that

> languages are more beautiful in proportion as they are richer in these condensed heroic expressions; that they are more beautiful because they are more expressive; and that because they are more expressive they are truer and more faithful. And that on the contrary, in proportion as they are more crowded with words of unknown origin (that is, with abstract, rational and ahistorical words), they are less delightful [*dilettevoli*], because obscure and confused, and therefore more likely to deceive and lead astray. (*NS*, § 445)

From this stems the notion of *Topics*, understood as the art of inventing, of finding, of "coming-to" or "coming-forth" [Italian: *invenire*], which, for Vico, was entirely based upon the senses and

aimed at *inventing* but not arbitrarily rather to *cope with necessity:* "In those earliest of times men needed to come up with [*ritrovare*] all the things *necessary to human life*" (*NS*, § 497). This language is fantastic and not arbitrary because it arises out of myth, and myth responds to necessity. Yet,

> the grammarians, encountering great numbers of words which give confused and indistinct ideas of things, and not knowing their origins . . . have given peace to their ignorance by setting up the universal maxim that articulate human words have *arbitrary significations* [che le voci umane articolate *significano a placito*]. (*NS*, § 444)

Vico makes the radical distinction between genius [*ingenium*] and reason, invention and judgment by asserting that knowledge is acquired by means of the first term, and by adding that no invention is given without judgment, nor is judgment possible without invention (cf. *AWI*, p. 72). In other words, if genius discovers similarities and relations "here" and "now," it paves the way for the rational process which in turn draws consequences from inventive discovery and allows the construction of a valid world within the boundaries of that discovery. Hence the theory of genius [*ingenium*] does not exclude the rational process at all. Indeed, the rational world acquires its validity solely in the historical context revealed by inventiveness [*ingenium*]. When "invention" and "discovery" are no longer valid, the rational world based on that very "discovery" falls apart. Using Heidegger rather that Vico, it can be said that *ingenium* is the memory of Being.

5.

All traditional metaphysics before and after Vico, preceding and following Humanism, up to Heidegger, starts with the issue of beings [*enti*] and abstract ahistorical principles, and ends up with onto-*theo*-logical metaphysics. The *New Science* is new because it does not study nature but rather human becoming, and poses the problem of what it is that "discloses" human historicity. Both the humanistic tradition and Vico begin their philosophical investigation with customs and rituals such as religion, marriage, and the burial of the dead, which are intrinsically human. Vico's problem is to identify right at the origin these attitudes; most important, however, is the word and, more precisely, the "fantastic" word.

The word is born out of necessity: poetic locution must have begun

> by a necessity of human nature . . . just as, by the same necessity, the fables, or imaginative universals [*universali fantastici*], arose be-

> fore the rational or philosophic universals, which were formed through the medium of prose speech. (*NS*, § 460)

It appears, then, that for Vico man's needs for understanding were taken care of by myths and stories before the rational prose of the philosophers made their appearance. And it follows from this that the activity of judging, of inferring an order and of systematizing a world and its institutions come *after* invention and ingenious, fantastic discovery.

By the same token, linguistic differences are not arbitrary, but are triggered by *different necessities:*

> For by virtue of the aforesaid diversity of their natures they [peoples] have regarded the same utilities or necessities of human life from different points of view, and there have thus arisen so many national customs, for the most part differing from one another and at times contrary to one another; so and not otherwise there have arisen as many different languages as there are nations. (*NS*, § 445)

In his conception of history—which entails a passage from the metaphysics of beings (entities) to the metaphysics of action and human praxis—Vico's main concern is the problematic of whether and how it is possible to envisage a new way to deal with the issue of *religion*. To this purpose, he advances the thesis of Divine Providence, which manifests itself in and through history, and which moreover leaves out Epicurean chance and historical fate. Vico does not start out from ontology but from philology, where the latter is understood as man's primary response to his needs in a concrete situation. By reinterpreting philosophy and philology, one discovers "the design of an ideal eternal history traversed in time by the histories of all nations" (*NS*, § 7). Vico holds that languages and literature (letters) are contemporary to each other, so literature cannot be thought of as a purely "literary" function, but rather as if endowed with the capacity and the task of unveiling the characteristic features of language. This explains Vico's protest against the philologists who

> have believed that among the nations languages first came into being and then letters, whereas . . . letters and languages were born twins and proceeded apace through all their three stages. (*NS*, § 33)

Thus Vico insists that in order to study the problem of Divine Providence one needs to investigate the problem of the word,

> as even now we may observe in peasants and other crude men, who in conflicts between words and meanings obstinately say that their right stands for them in the words. And this counsel of divine providence to the end that the gentiles, not yet capable of universals . . . might be led by this very particularity of their words to observe the laws universally. (*NS*, § 38)

As a result, Vico emphasizes not the ahistorical abstraction of the true [*il vero*], but the certain [*il certo*], that is, the historical manifestation of reality in its historicity:

> The first gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets, who spoke in poetic characters. (*NS*, § 34)

The preeminence of poetry is affirmed with references to Virgil and Horace:

> Virgil uses the word [*viri*] emphatically in that sense at the beginning of his *Aeneid: "Arma virunque cano"* (Of arms I sing and the hero); and Horace, *Ad. Pis.* 141, translates the first verse of the *Odyssey: "Dic mihi, Musa, virum"* (Of the man, O Muse, sing to me). (*NS*, § 657)

It is crucial, then, to bear in mind the Latin tradition which, for instance, Heidegger overlooked when he affirmed the originary function of poetry. Heidegger preferred to limit himself solely to Hölderlin, Trakl, and George, thus ignoring the humanistic tradition, which was thus excluded from the whole issue of the founding role of poetry.

The question to address at this point is whether Divine Providence is embedded in the word. Before we can answer the question, let us see a practical example of how Vico uses poetic metaphor to assert the priority of poetry as the determining factor in men's historical world. The God of Poetry, Apollo, desires Daphne and pursues her. In her attempt to escape, Daphne transforms herself into a laurel bush and so becomes mankind's genealogical tree. The divine Apollo then becomes incarnate through history. In Vico's words:

> Apollo begins this history by pursuing Daphne, a vagabond maiden wandering through the forests (in the nefarious life); and she, by the aid she besought of the gods . . . on standing still is changed to a laurel (a plant which is ever green in its certain and acknowledged offspring), in the same sense in which the Latins use *stipites* for the stocks of families; and the recourse of barbarism brought back the same heroic phraseology, for they call genealogies trees,

> and the founders they call stocks or stems, and the descendants branches, and the families lineages. (*NS*, § 533)

If poetry as an ingenious activity is an originary form which allows one to relate to and cope with natural necessity by finding similarities, it is also by virtue of this capacity that it transforms reality, "as a demonstrated necessity of nature" (cf. *NS*, § 34). Therefore:

> Apollo is always young (just as the life of Daphne, changed to a laurel, is always verdant), for Apollo, through the names of the great houses, makes men eternal in their families. (*NS* § 538)

6.

Vico's basic thesis on this point is that history is not created by men as such, but is rather determined by a superior order to which all human beings are subject: hence any anthropological perspective is absent from Vico's thought. Men are persons not by themselves but only in relation to whether they abide or not by that order. The *New Science* identifies this order in Divine Providence, and in this sense Vico's work reveals his religious intention. Basically, Vico essays to overcome both the Stoics' thesis, according to which fate determines history, and the Epicurean philosophy, according to which human becoming is subject only to chance. It follows then, that

> in this other principal aspect, this Science is a history of human ideas through which it seems that the metaphysics of the human mind must proceed; and in accordance with the axiom that "sciences must begin with the times in which their subject matter begins," this queen of sciences must begin with the times in which the first men began to think humanly and not with those in which philosophers began to reflect upon human ideas. (*NS* § 347; Pompa trans.)

To this end, Vico asserts that such a science must be a historical demonstration of Providence and that, moreover,

> it must be a history of the institutions by which, without human discernment or counsel, and often against the designs of men, providence has ordered this great city of the human race. For though this world has been created in time and particular, the institutions established therein by providence are universal and eternal. (*NS*, § 342)

In other words, the historical cycle in its decay and ruin is determined by the human absence of an answer to natural needs—to "necessità naturali," as Vico calls them—i.e., by withdrawing from the *hic et nunc* of necessity. This is the moment when words become abstract and ahistorical, writing no longer corresponds to any real urgency, men fall into barbarism and the grip of rationality, and the world built on these principles falls irreparably into ruin due to dogmatization. This is the barbarity of rationality and the end of an epoch, for

> the nature of our civilized minds is so detached from the senses, even in the vulgar, by abstractions corresponding to all the abstract terms our language abounds in, and so refined by the art of writing, and as it were spiritualized by the use of numbers, because even the vulgar know how to count and reckon, that it is naturally beyond our power to form the vast image of this mistress called "Sympathetic Nature." (*NS*, § 378)

It cannot be denied that, even in the barbarous age of rationality, men resort to fantasy. However, they can no longer recognize its primary or founding function, and so they only deploy fantasy as an external substitutive tool to activate the functioning of rational concepts on the passions, thus reaching where the rational process cannot:

> For when we wish to give utterance to our understanding of spiritual things we must seek aid from our imagination to explain them and, like painters, form human images of them. (*NS*, § 402)

But if poetry is the founding element of humanity—as Vico asserts—then it is in poetry where our search should begin to find Divine Providence. However, how and on what basis can one speak of Divine Providence if the philosopher himself maintains that poetic language corresponds to "natural necessities" (*NS*, § 34)?

All of Vico's philosophy aims to prove how eternal civil history establishes an order through the theory of genius, fantasy, and the metaphysical word, a natural providence that sets the artificial fires of the various cultures, the theological myths and the different institutions which light up the dark night in which man has slumbered: Man is walled up in history. The necessity from which history springs forth is, in its originarity, natural and abysmal; it cannot be deduced rationally. Any new approach to religious thought is blocked even against Vico's own intentions.

Vico writes that in their originally nefarious state men "in

despair of nature's succors desired something superior to nature to save them" (*NS*, § 385). But it is impossible to infer from his premises the longing for this something superior to nature that could save the savage men. Once "in the despair of nature's succors," men find only history, the urgency to move on through history and nothing that can go beyond history: frightened by lightning and terrified by storms during barbarian times, the only order that appeared was the inexorable continuity of history within which man arose, lived, and perished.

But there's another point which is essential to make: all Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Christian thought is informed by the preoccupation to save the individual, his sorrows, labors, and despair. Running counter to his own intentions, Vico's model does not provide an approach to such a conception. The "necessity of nature" which gives life to the various worlds and is the cause of their birth, flourishing, and extinction in the eternal order of history pays no mind to the individual but only to its own revelation, even in its destructive stage. So, then, why is this alogic abysmal nature called "divine"? In the ordering of eternal history the wisdom of nature is really only interested in saving the species, with little or no regard for the individual. History in fact reveals the continuity of generations, not the saving of the individual or his solace. Such considerations entail man's condemnation of history and the implacable nature which regards the individual only inasmuch as he contributes to the realization of history. The parenthesis between birth and death resembles a theater, a series of scenes with characters who come to life and act and then die after going through tragic and irreversible displacements. In the time span between birth and death there appears the terrible consciousness of death, the unheard-of awareness of self, of one's own sorrow and hope, of our continuous separation from objects, people, and the ephemeral instant: it is the consciousness of the tragic aspect of our nonreligious epoch.

If the actor on the stage exists in relation to the tale, to the myth that has been defined here as a closed narrative structure with its beginning, development, and end, beyond which nothing follows; and if drama imitates praxis, that is to say, an action which, different from poiesis, does not exist for an external purpose, then it follows that, using the Cartesian formula, the actor—who is a man—can maintain not that "I think therefore I am" but "I die therefore I am." What is disclosed between birth and death is the terrifying consciousness of death, that is, the unheard-of consciousness of one's own self, one's own pain and hope and

the continuous detachment from reality.

Vico in recent historical times and before him such pre-Platonic thinkers as Sophocles and Heraklitos have perceived and expressed in their works the tragic character of existence. I think it is fitting to end these remarks with a passage from Ungaretti:

> The facts are nevertheless clear and inexorable: there's the bygone illusion of a European culture and the proof of reason's impotence to save anything; there's science, lethally wounded in its moralistic ambitions and dishonored, as it were, by the cruelty of its manifestations.[7]

From this stems the appropriateness of the doubt that to be consigned to the human condition is really a divine gift:

> the continuous dissimulation of the tragic aspect of being human to human conscience which is reflected in order to be questioned is very much like when an object is reflected in the sea. The object becomes a plaything in water, a nothing. It is an ineffable emblem which, once fixed, changes according to the moods of the monster: a poetry of sweet disclosures, a long drawn amorous lamentation, an apparent encountering pining away with antinomic destinies.[8]

Finally it all comes down to the celebration of the miracle of poetry, which on a different occasion Ungaretti defined as:

> a mystery, which in poetry is that involuntary attraction of roots that brings the words together in a bond beyond their meaning, mystery perceivable in the distances of space and through time that's given to objects and such as to bring them into view in a plateau of forgetfulness, to be disvested even of their names and become, impatiently, the criers of dreams . . . there's no poetry if objects, from the depth of space and night of time, cannot suddenly recall their names and overwhelm us, dazzling and frightening us with the beauty of their presence. At that point we are invested with the precision of this beauty, a precision outside of human measure which takes our breath away and all possibilities to exist before us or any other presence.[9]

1. Hegel, *Works*, Vol. XVIII, p. 12.

2. This problem is dicussed at length in my *Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism* (Binghamton, NY: SUNY Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1983).

3. All references to the *New Science* are to the Bergin-Fisch translation: *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983). [Heretofore the passages quoted will be indicated in text with the abbreviation *NS* followed by the paragraph number in this standard edition. *Tr.*]

4. *De Antiquissima . . .* in *Opere,* edited by F. Nicolini, p. 248. [English translation from "On the Ancient Wisdom of the Italians Taken from the Origins of the Latin Language," contained in *Vico; Selected Writings,* edited and translated by Leon Pompa (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), p. 51. Hereafter *AWI.* This edition also contains passages from the essay *On the Study Methods of Our Time* and selections from the *New Science,* whose translation has often been preferred to the Bergin-Fisch version. *Ed.*]

5. [Italian: *ingegno;* English: genius, ingenuity, inventiveness, according to context; cf. Pompa, ed., *Vico: Selected Writings,* p. 69. *Tr.*]

6. [*Generi fantastici* is rendered by Leon Pompa as "imaginative genera," which is perhaps more in tune with Vico's thought than Bergin-Fisch's "class concepts." *Ed.*]

7. Giuseppe Ungaretti, "Testimonianza su Valéry," in *Vita d'un uomo,* p. 637.

8. Ibid., p. 461.

9. Ibid., "St. John Perse," pp. 651-52.