

GIAMBATTISTA VICO
PRINCIPLES OF NEW SCIENCE CONCERNING THE COMMON NATURE OF NATIONS
[THE NEW SCIENCE] (3rd Ed. 1744)

(references are to numbered paragraphs not pages)

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Idea of the Work

Vico's "New Science or Metaphysic" (31) is devoted to studying the "common nature of nations in the light of divine providence" (31) by discovering the "origins of divine and human institutions among the gentile nations" (31) and establishing a "system of natural law among the gentes" (31). Vico is interested in tracing what he later calls the "ideal eternal history traversed in time by the histories of all nations" (35). The history of mankind from the time of the Egyptians to the present, he argues, is divisible into "three ages" (31): the "age of the gods, in which the gentiles believed they lived under divine governments" (31); the "age of the heroes" (31) who "reigned everywhere in aristocratic commonwealths, on account of a certain superiority of nature which they held themselves to have over the plebs" (31); and the "age of men, in which all men recognised themselves as equal in human nature, and therefore there were established first the popular commonwealths and then the monarchies, both of which are forms of human government" (31).

Corresponding to these "three kinds of [human] nature and government" (32) were "three kinds of language . . . spoken" (32) which comprise the "vocabulary of this Science" (32). During the age of the gods, there existed a "mute language of signs and physical objects having natural relations to the ideas they wished to express" (32) (Vico seems to suggest here that at this stage of historical development, humans used sign-language to communicate). During the age of the heroes, there was a "heroic language" (32) consisting of "heroic emblems, or similitudes, comparisons, images, metaphors, and natural descriptions" (32). During the age of men, there came to the fore a "[h]uman language using words agreed upon by the people, a language of which they are absolute lords, and . . . a language whereby the people may fix the meaning of the laws by which the nobles as well as the plebs are bound" (32). Once the "laws had been put into the vulgar tongue, the science of laws passed from the control of the nobles" (32).

Vico's concern is with the "beginnings not only of languages but also of letters" (33). Philologists have been wrong to believe 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" (33). Vico's point here is that the acquisition on the part of human beings of a natural or unpoetic language (i.e. one free of figurative language) did not pre-exist the development of the literary arts ('letters'). Rather, language has always been from its inception poetic in nature and thus necessarily replete with figures of speech (metaphors, metonyms, etc.). Language has never functioned, in the way that philosophers like Plato hoped, in some pure, undistorted way free of the excesses of figurative language to merely mirror the world.

Vico argues that the "principle of these origins of both language and of letters lies in the fact that the first gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters" (34). This "discovery" (34), he claims, is the "master key of this Science" (34) and is something difficult for modern people, "with our civilised natures" (34), to "understand" (34). By 'poetic characters,' Vico means "certain imaginative genera (images for the most part of animate substances, of gods or heroes,

formed by their imagination) to which they reduced all the species or all the particulars appertaining to each genus" (34). These "divine or heroic characters were true fables or myths, and their allegories are found to contain meanings not analogical but univocal, not philosophical but historical, of the peoples of Greece of those times" (34). These tales, spun by men of the "most vigorous imaginations, as in men of the feeblest reasoning powers" (34), communicate "sentiments clothed in the greatest passions and therefore full of sublimity and arousing wonder" (34). Arguing that the "source of all poetic locution" (34) is the "poverty of language and need to be understood" (34), "[h]eroic speech followed immediately on the mute language of acts and objects that had natural relations to the ideas they were meant of signify, which was used in divine times" (34). In the third stage, that is, in the "natural course of human institutions" (34), "heroic verses" (34) preceded "iambics, and finally settled into prose" (34).

From these three languages is "formed the mental dictionary" (35) or "lexicon" (35) by which to "interpret all the various articulated languages" (35). Corresponding to each of these three ages, "forms of government" (36), "types of civil nature" (36) and languages (which "succeed one another as the nations run their course" [36]) is "in the same order a jurisprudence suited to each in its own time" (36). The first kind of jurisprudence was a "mystic theology" (37) articulated by "theological poets . . . who interpreted the mysteries of the oracles, which among all nations gave their response in verse" (37). The "mysteries of this vulgar wisdom were hidden in the fables" (37) from which "philosophers later had such a desire to recover the wisdom of the ancients" (37). The second kind of jurisprudence was "heroic jurisprudence" (38) by which the heroes "thought they had a natural right to precisely what, how much and of what sort had been set forth in words" (38). The "gentiles" (38) were "led" (38) to "observe the laws universally" (38) by "this very particularity of their words" (38) and by a "sovereign private interest, which the heroes identified with that of their fatherlands, of which they were the only citizens" (38). For the sake of the fatherland in question, they did not hesitate to "consecrate themselves and their families to the will of the laws" (38). Divine providence harnessed "such grievous, ugly and cruel private vices, in order that the cities might be preserved during a period when the minds of men, intent on particulars, could not naturally understand a common good" (38). The third kind of jurisprudence, "natural equity" (39), is found in "free commonwealths, in which the people, each for his own particular good (without understanding that it is the same for all), are led to command universal laws" (39).

Book I: Establishment of Principles

Vico argues that "we should begin our study of gentile learning by scientifically ascertaining this important starting-point – where and when that learning had its first beginnings in the world" (51). The goal in so doing is to adduce "human reasons thereby in support of Christian faith" (51). The

first science to be learned should be mythology or the interpretation of fables; for . . . all the histories of the gentiles have their beginnings in fables, which were the first histories of the gentile nations. By such a method, the beginnings of the sciences as well as of the nations are to be discovered, for they sprang from the nations and from no other source. It will be shown throughout this work that they had their beginnings in the public needs or utilities of the peoples and that they were later perfected as acute individuals applied their reflection to them. ()

"This is the proper starting-point for universal history" (51).

Section II: Elements

With these goals in mind, Vico proceeds to offer the “following maxims, both philosophical and philological, including a few reasonable and proper postulates and some clarified definitions” (119). Like the “blood does in animate bodies, so will these elements animate it in all its reasonings about the nature of nations” (119).

“Philosophy contemplates reason, whence comes knowledge of the true; philology observes that of which human choice is author, whence comes consciousness of the certain” (138). The term ‘philology’ here alludes to “all the grammarians, historians, critics, who have occupied themselves with the study of the languages and deeds of peoples: both at home, as in their customs and laws, and abroad, as in their wars, peaces, alliances, travels, and commerce” (139). Philosophers have “failed by half in not giving certainty to their reasonings by appeal to the authority of the philologists” (140), while the latter in turn have not given “their authority the sanction of truth by appealing to the reason of philosophers” (140). Had they done so, Vico argues, he would not have had to compose his New Science.

“Human choice, by its nature most uncertain, is made certain and determined by the common sense of men with respect to human needs or utilities, which are the two sources of the natural law of the gentes” (141). “Common sense is judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation, or the entire human race” (142). “Uniform ideas originating among entire peoples unknown to each other must have a common ground of truth” (144). These axioms, Vico contends, “will provide a new art of criticism concerning the founders of nations, who must have preceded by more than a thousand years the writers with whom criticism has so far been occupied” (143). The “natural laws of the gentes” (146) did not “come out of one first nation” (146) whence it was “received” (146) by the others. Such an error “was encouraged by the bad example of the Egyptians and Greeks in vainly boasting that they had spread civilisation throughout the world” (146). Had this been the case, “it would have been a civil law communicated to other peoples by human provision, and not a law which divine providence instituted naturally in all nations along with human customs themselves” (146). It is the goal of the New Science to “demonstrate” (146) that the “natural law of the gentes had separate origins among the several peoples, each in ignorance of the others, and it was only subsequently, as a result of wars, embassies, alliances, and commerce, that it came to be recognised as common to the entire human race” (146).

The “nature of institutions is nothing but their coming into being at certain times and in certain guises. Whenever the time and guise are thus and so, such and not otherwise are the institutions that come into being” (147).

“Vulgar traditions must have had public grounds of truth, by virtue of which they came into being and were preserved by entire peoples over long periods of time” (149). It is the goal of the New Science to “recover these grounds of truth . . . which with the passing of years and the changes in languages and customs, has come down to us enveloped in falsehood” (150). The “vulgar tongues” (151) are the “most weighty witnesses concerning those ancient customs of the peoples that were in use at the time the languages were formed” (151). In particular, a “language of an ancient nation . . . should be a great witness to the customs of the early days of the world” (152). There must in the nature of human institutions be a mental language common to all nations, which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects” (161). The proof of this is the existence of “proverbs or maxims . . . in which substantially the same meanings find as many diverse expressions as there are nations ancient and modern” (161). It is this “common mental language” (162) which is “proper to our Science, by whose light linguistic scholars will be enabled to construct a mental vocabulary common to all the various articulate languages living and dead” (162).

"Wherever a people has grown savage in arms so that human laws have no longer any place among it, the only powerful means of reducing it is religion" (177). This is something which Thomas Hobbes failed to grasp.

"When men are ignorant of the natural causes producing things, and cannot even explain them by analogy with similar things, they attribute their own nature to them. The vulgar, for example, say the magnet loves the iron" (180). The "human mind . . . wherever it is lost in ignorance makes itself the rule of the universe in respect of everything it does not know" (181). "Imagination is more robust in proportion as reasoning power is weak" (185). The "most sublime labour of poetry is to give sense and passion to insensate things" (186) much as children "take inanimate things in their hands and talk to them in play as if they were living persons" (186) which "proves to us that in the world's childhood men were by nature sublime poets" (187). The human mind is "naturally compelled to take delight in uniformity" (204) but the "first men, the children, as it were, of the human race, not being able to form intelligible class concepts of things, had a natural need to create poetic characters, that is, imaginative class concepts or universals, to which, as to certain models or ideal portraits, to reduce all to particular species which resembled them" (209).

Alluding to Descartes, Vico argues that the human mind is "naturally inclined by the senses to see itself externally in the body, and only with great difficulty does it come to understand itself by means of reflection" (236). From this derives the "universal principle of etymology in all languages: words are carried over from bodies and from the properties of bodies to signify the institutions of the mind and spirit" (237). The "order of ideas must follow the order of institutions" (238): "first, the forests, after that the huts, then the villages, next the cities, and finally the academies" (239). This leads to a "great principle of etymology, for this sequence of human institutions sets the pattern for the histories of words in the various native languages" (240).

The "nature of peoples is first crude, then severe, then benign, then delicate, finally dissolute" (242). These qualities correspond to "huge and grotesque" (243) humans like the cyclops, then the "proud and magnanimous" (243) like Achilles, the "valorous and just" (243) like Scipio Africanus, figures with "great semblances of virtue accompanied by great vices" (243) like Alexander and Caesar, the "melancholy and reflective" (243) like Tiberius, and finally "dissolute and shameless madmen" (243) like Caligula and Nero. Each of these types is linked to a particular stage of history, the first sort being "necessary in order to make one mind obey another in the city-state" (244), the second to "establish the aristocratic commonwealth" (244), the third to "open the way for popular liberty" (244), the fourth to "bring in the monarchies" (244), the fifth to establish them, and the sixth to overthrow them. It is in this way that the history of the nations can be explained in terms of its "rise, development, maturity, decline, and fall" (245).

Section III: Principles

Vico is keen to grasp "in what institutions all men agree and always have agreed" (332) and in this way settle on those "universal and eternal principles (such as every science must have) on which all nations were founded and still preserve themselves" (332). There are three universal "human customs: all have some religion, all contract solemn marriages, all bury their dead" (333) which, because they distinguish human civilisation from "bestial wilderness" (333) function as the "three first principles of this Science" (333).

Section IV: Method

Having established the "principles" (338) of his Science, Vico next turns his

attention to the "method which it should follow" (338).

Vico argues that the "first men . . . must have done their thinking under the strong impulsion of violent passions, as beasts do" (340). These passions were regulated by the frightful thought of some divinity which imposed form and measure on the bestial passions of these lost men and transformed them into human passions. From this thought have sprung the conatus proper to the human will, to hold in check the motions impressed upon the mind by the body, so as either to quiet them altogether, as becomes the wise man, or at least to direct them to better use, as becomes the civil man. This control over the motion of their bodies is certainly an effect of the freedom of human choice, and thus of free will, which is the home and seat of all the virtues, and among the others of justice. When informed by justice, the will is the fount of all that is just and of all the laws dictated by justice. But to impute conatus to bodies is as much as to impute to them freedom to regulate their motions, whereas all bodies are by nature necessary agents. And what the theorists of mechanics call powers, forces, conatus, are insensible motions of bodies, by which they approach their centres of gravity, as ancient mechanics had it, or depart from this centers of gravity, as modern mechanics has it. (340)

However, men "because of their corrupted nature, are under the tyranny of self-love, which compels them to make private utility their chief guide. Seeking everything useful for themselves and nothing for their companions, they cannot bring their passions under control to direct them toward justice" (341). When he marries, his sympathy is expanded to include his family; when he enters into "civil life" (341), it expands to include the entire city; when "it is extended over several peoples" (341), it expands to include the nation; and when treaties and what not are concluded between nations, it expands to include the "entire human race" (341).

In all these circumstances man desired principally his own utility. Therefore it is only by divine providence that he can be held within these institutions to practice justice as a member of the society of the family, of the city, and finally of mankind. Unable to attain all the utilities he wishes, he is constrained by these institutions to seek those which are his due; and this is called just. That which regulates all human justice is therefore divine justice, which is administered by divine providence to preserve human society. (341)

It is for this reason that in "one of its principal aspects, this Science must therefore be a rational civil theology of divine providence" (342), something not hitherto accomplished by philosophers who have attributed "human affairs" (342) to a "blind concourse of atoms" (342) or a "deaf chain of cause and effect" (342). Other philosophers have focussed on the "order of natural things" (342) and confirmed it by the "physical order observed in the motion of such bodies as the spheres and the elements" (342), rather than the "economy of civil institutions" (342) which is Vico's focus. The goal of this Science is the "demonstration . . . of what providence has wrought in history, for 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" (342).

There are "certain divine proofs" (343) by which the role of providence is "confirmed and demonstrated" (343):

Since divine providence has omnipotence as minister, it must unfold its institutions by means as easy as the natural customs of men. Since it has

infinite wisdom as counselor, whatever it disposes must, in its entirety, be institutive order. Since it has for its end its own immeasurable goodness, whatever it institutes must be directed to a good always superior to that which men have proposed to themselves. (343)

Vico contends that there are "no sublimer proofs" (344) of the hand played by divine providence in human affairs than these three factors: the "naturalness [of the means], the [unfolding institutive] order [in which they are employed], and the end [thereby served], which is the preservation of the human race" (344). These are amplified studying "with what ease the institutions are brought into being" (344), the "order by which those are now born in their proper times and places which ought now to be born" (344), and "how other divine benefits could arise by which . . . human society could be better conducted and preserved" (344). To these ends, Vico will offer the "following sorts of logical proofs" (346). The "reasoning of the origins of institutions, divine and human" (346) leads to the "defining character of [first] principles" (346): we "explain the particular ways in which they come into being: that is to say, their nature, the explanation of which is the distinguishing mark of science. And finally [these origins] are confirmed by the eternal properties [the institutions] preserve, which could not be what they are if the institutions had not come into being just as they did, in those particular times, places, and fashions, which is to say with those particular natures" (346).

Vico stresses that his Science, in "search of these natures of human institutions" (346), "proceeds by a severe analysis of human thoughts about the human necessities or utilities of social life, which are the two perennial springs of the natural law of the gentes" (347). This is why the New Science is as such a "history of human ideas, on which it seems the metaphysics of the human mind must proceed" (347) in keeping with the axiom that "sciences must begin where their subject matter begins" (347). It accordingly "took its start when the first men began to think humanly, and not when the philosophers began to reflect on human ideas" (347). To determine "when and where these human thoughts were born" (348) and thereby "give it certainty by means of its own metaphysical chronology and geography" (348), Vico argues that the New Science "applies a likewise metaphysical art of criticism with regard to the founders of these same nations" (348). The "criterion" (348) of such criticism is "that taught by divine providence and common to all men, namely the common sense of the human race, determined by the necessary harmony of human institutions, in which all the beauty of the civil world consists" (348). Since these "institutions have been established by divine providence, the course of the institutions of the nations had to be, must now be, and will have to be such as our Science demonstrates" (348). Vico's Science describes an "ideal eternal history traversed in time by the history of every nation in its rise, development, maturity, decline, and fall" (349). Vico declares that "he who meditates this Science narrates to himself this ideal eternal history so far as he himself makes it for himself by that proof 'it had, has, and will have to be'" (348). The "first indubitable principle" (348) is that this "world of nations has certainly been made by men, and its guise must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind. And history cannot be more certain than when he who creates the things also narrates them" (348). Just as "geometry, when it constructs the world of quantity out of its elements, or contemplates that world, is creating it for itself, just so does our Science [create for itself the world of nations], but with a reality greater by just so much as the institutions having to do with human affairs are more real than points, lines, surfaces, and figures are.

Book II: Poetic Wisdom

Prolegomena

Given that the "nature of everything born or made betrays the crudeness of its origins" (361), Vico begins Book II by acknowledging that "all the histories of the gentile nations have had fabulous beginnings" (361), the first Greek "sages" (361) being "theological poets" (361). Poetry is the basis of the earliest theoretical speculations, whether it be the "sublime natural theology" (361) of the Egyptians or ancient Greek philosophy. They utilised poetry for five reasons: "reverence for religion, for the gentile nations were everywhere founded by fables on religion" (362); the "grand effect thence derived, namely this civil world, so wisely ordered it could only be the effect of a superhuman wisdom" (362); the "occasions which . . . these fables . . . gave the philosophers for instituting research and for meditating lofty things in philosophy" (362); the "ease with which they were thus enabled . . . to explain their sublime philosophical meditations by means of the expressions happily left them by the poets; and the "confirmations of their own meditations which the philosophers derived from authority of religion and the wisdom of the poets" (362). Vico argues that "as much as the poets had first sensed in the way of vulgar wisdom, the philosophers later understood in the way of esoteric wisdom; so that the former may be said to have been the sense and the latter the intellect of the human race" (363). The human mind, he points out, "does not understand anything of which it has had no previous impression . . . from the senses" (363). The mind "uses the intellect when, from something it senses, it gathers something which does not fall under the senses" (363).

Chapter I: Wisdom in General

Wisdom is the "faculty which commands all the disciplines by which we acquire all the sciences and arts that make up humanity" (364):

Man, in his proper being as man, consists of mind and spirit, or, if we prefer, of intellect and will. It is the function of wisdom to fulfil both these parts in man, the second by way of the first, to the end that by a mind illuminated by knowledge of the highest institutions, the spirit may be led to choose the best. The highest institutions in this universe are turned toward and conversant with God; the best are those which look to the good of all mankind. The former are called divine institutions, the latter human. True wisdom, then, should teach the knowledge of divine institutions in order to conduct human institutions to the highest good. (364)

Wisdom among the gentiles "began with the Muse" (365), defined by Homer . . . as 'knowledge of good and evil,' and later called divination" (365). Because such wisdom was "something naturally denied to man" (365), God founded the true religion of the Hebrews, from our Christian religion arose" (365). The Muse was first the "Science of divining by auspices" (365): this was the "vulgar wisdom of all nations" (365) which "consisted in contemplating God under the attribute of his providence" (365). The "theological poets, who certainly founded the humanity of Greece, were versed in this wisdom" (365). Wisdom was later "attributed to men renowned for useful counsels given to mankind" (365) and "then extended to men who for the good of peoples and nations wisely ordered and governed commonwealths" (365). Still later, wisdom came to mean "knowledge of natural divine things; that is, metaphysics, called for that reason divine science, which, seeking knowledge of man's mind in God, and recognising God as the source of all truth must recognise him as the regulator of all good" (365). This is why among the Hebrews and, later, the Christians, wisdom came to be called the "science of eternal things revealed by God" (365). There is a distinction to be drawn, accordingly, between, "three kinds of theology" (366): "poetic theology, that of the theological poets" (366), "natural theology, that of the metaphysicians" (366), and "our Christian theology, a mixture of civil and

natural with the loftiest revealed theology" (366). All three are "united in the contemplation of divine providence" (366). "Divine providence has so conducted human institutions that, starting from the poetic theology which regulated them by certain sensible signs believed to be divine counsels sent to man by the gods, and by means of the natural theology which demonstrates providence by eternal reasons which do not fall under the senses, the nations were disposed to receive revealed theology in virtue of a supernatural faith, superior not only to the senses but to human reason itself" (366).

Chapter II: Exposition and Division of Poetic Wisdom

Because metaphysics is the "sublime science which distributes their determinate subject matters to all the so-called subaltern sciences" (367), and because the "wisdom of the ancients was that of the theological poets" (366),

we must trace the beginnings of poetic wisdom to a crude metaphysics. From this as from a trunk, there branch out from one limb logic, morals, economics, and politics, *all poetic*; and from another, physics, the mother of cosmography and astronomy, the latter of which gives their certainty to its two daughters, chronology and geography – *all likewise poetic*. We shall show clearly and distinctly how the founders of gentile humanity by means of their natural theology (or metaphysics) imagined the gods; how by means of their logic they invented languages; by morals, created heroes; by economics, founded families, and by politics, cities; by their physics, established the beginnings of things as all divine; by their cosmography, fashioned for themselves a universe entirely of gods; by astronomy, carried the planets and constellations from earth to heaven; by chronology, gave a beginning to [measured] times; and how by geography the Greeks, for example, described the [whole] world withing their own Greece. (366)

It is in this way that "our Science comes to be at once a history of the ideas, the customs, and the deeds of mankind. From these three we shall derive the principles of the history of human nature, which we shall show to be the principles of universal history" (367).

Section I: Poetic Metaphysics

Chapter I: Poetic Metaphysics as the Origin of Poetry, Idolatry, Divination, and Sacrifices

Poetic wisdom, Vico argues, is the "first wisdom of the gentile world" (375) and "must have begun with a metaphysics not rational and abstract like that of learned men now, but felt and imagined as that these first men must have been, who, without power of ratiocination, were all robust sense and vigorous imagination. This metaphysics was their poetry, a faculty born with them" (375) and "born of their ignorance of causes, for ignorance, the mother of wonder, made everything wonderful to men who were ignorant of everything" (375). Their poetry was "at first divine, because . . . they imagined the causes of the things the felt and wondered at to be gods" (375). It was in this way that they "gave the things they wondered at substantial being after their own ideas, just as children do, whom we see take inanimate things in their hands and play with them and talk to them as though they were living persons" (375). The "children of nascent mankind created things according to their own ideas" (376) in a process different from God's creativity: for god, "in his purest intelligence, knows things, and, by knowing them, creates them; but they, in their robust ignorance, did it by virtue of a wholly corporeal imagination. And because it was quite corporeal, they did it with marvellous sublimity; such and so great that it excessively perturbed the very persons who by imagining did the creating, for which they

were called 'poets,' which is Greek for 'creators'" (376). The "threefold labour of great poetry" (376) is to "invent sublime fables suited to the popular imagination" (376), "perturb to excess, with a view to the end proposed" (376), and "teach the vulgar to act virtuously" (376).

Vico imagines poetry beginning with the earliest men (giants) who, "frightened and astonished" (377) by natural occurrences such as thunder and lightning, responded by expressing their "very violent passions by shouting and grumbling" (377), picturing the sky "to themselves as a great animated body, which in that aspect they called Jove . . . who meant to tell them something by the hiss of the bolts and the clap of his thunder" (377). Thus they "began to exercise that natural curiosity which is the daughter of ignorance and the mother of knowledge, and which, opening the mind of man, gives birth to wonder" (377). This continues even to the present "age of minds enlightened and instructed by philosophy" (377) when the relationship between a magnet and iron is comprehended in terms of a "vast animate body which feels passions and affections" (377). Vico argues that "we can scarcely understand, still less imagine, how those first men thought who founded humanity" (378) because the "nature of our civilised minds is so detached from the senses . . . by abstractions corresponding to all the abstract terms our language abound in, and so refined by the art of writing, and as its were spiritualised by the use of numbers, . . . that it is naturally beyond our power to form the vast image of this mistress called 'Sympathetic Nature'" (378).

It is in this fashion that the first theological poets created the "first divine fable, the greatest they every created: that of Jove, king and father of men and gods, in the act of hurling the lightning bolt" (379). In this way "to all of the universe which came within their scope, and to all its parts, they gave the being of animate substance. This is the civil history of the expression 'All things are full of Jove'" (379). From these earliest acts, all our modern language derives. For example, Vico explains, the "first men who spoke by signs, naturally believed that lightning bolts and thunderclaps were signs made to them by Jove; when from *nuo*, to make a sign, came *numen*, the divine will" (379). Language bears in this way the trace of the earliest poetic attempts to grasp the nature of the universe in which man found himself. "Thus the many Joves the philologists wonder at are so many physical histories preserved for us by the fables. For every gentile nation had its Jove" (380). From this point of view, Jove was a "poetic character" (381), i.e. "born naturally in poetry as a divine character or imaginative universal, to which everything having to do with the auspices was referred by all the ancient gentile nations, which must therefore all have been poetic by nature. Their poetic wisdom began with this poetic metaphysics, which contemplated God by the attribute of his providence; and they were called theological poets, or sages who understood the language of the gods expressed in the auspices of Jove" (381). Their "science was called Muse" (381). "Every gentile nation has its own sybil versed in this science. . . . Sybils and oracles are the most ancient institutions of the gentile world" (381). It was thus "fear which created gods in the world" (381): idolatry came into birth at the same time as divination.

This, then, is the "origin of poetry" (382), its "proper material" (382) being "credible impossibility" (382) (e.g. it is "impossible that bodies should have minds, yet it was believed that the thundering sky was Jove" [383]). This "upsets all the theories of the origin of poetry from Plato and Aristotle" (384) onwards: "for it has been shown that it was deficiency of human reasoning power that gave rise to poetry so sublime that the philosophies which came afterward, the arts of poetry and of criticism, have produced none equal or better, and have even prevented its production" (384). For this reason, Homer was the "first in the order of merit" (384). For this reason, too, the wisdom of the ancients is not "matchless" (384) for their wisdom was the "vulgar wisdom of the lawgivers who founded the human race, not the esoteric wisdom of great and rare philosophers" (384).

No "mystic meanings of lofty philosophy should therefore be attributed to these early works.

Section II: Poetic Logic

Chapter I: Poetic Language

Here, Vico argues that "[t]hat which is metaphysics insofar as it contemplates things in all the forms of their being, is logic insofar as it considers things in all the forms by which they be signified" (400). Thus far, we have considered poetry as a "poetic metaphysics in which the theological poets imagined bodies to be for the most part divine substances" (400). Now the "same poetry is to be considered as poetic logic, by which it signifies them" (400).

Logic, he argues, "comes from *logos*, whose first and proper meaning was *fabula*, fable" (401). "In Greek the fable was also called *mythos*, myth, whence comes the Latin *mutus*, mute" (401). Speech, he argues, was "born in mute times as mental [or sign] language" (401) which "existed before vocal or articulate [language]; whence *logos* means both word and idea" (401). The "first language in the first mute times of the nations must have begun with signs, whether gestures or physical objects, which had natural relations to the ideas [to be expressed]" (401). However, the first *spoken* language "was not a language in accord with the nature of the things it dealt with . . . but was a fantastic speech making use of physical substances endowed with life and most of them imagined to be divine" (401). The gods were explained as so many "substances of the sky, the earth, and the sea, which they imagined to be animate divinities" (401). Similarly, "by means of the other divinities they signified the other kinds of things appertaining to each, denoting all flowers, for instance, by Flora, and all fruits by Pomona" (401). More recently, this practice has been reversed

in respect of spiritual things, such as the faculties of the human mind, the passions, virtues, vices, sciences, and arts; for the most part, the ideas we form of them are so many feminine personifications, to which we refer all the causes, properties, and effects that severally appertain to them. For when we wish to give utterance to our understanding of spiritual things, must seek aid from our imagination to explain them and, like painters, form human images of them. But these theological poets, unable to make use of the understanding, did the opposite and more sublime thing: they attributed senses and passions . . . to bodies, and to bodies as vast as sky, sea, and earth. (402)

However, as "these vast imaginations shrank and the power of abstraction grew, the personifications were reduced to diminutive signs. Metonymy drew a cloak of learning over the prevailing ignorance of these origins of human institutions, which have remained buried until now" (402).

Chapter II: Corollaries Concerning Poetic Tropes, Monsters and Metamorphoses

Vico contends that the "first tropes are corollaries of this poetic logic" (404), the most "luminous . . . necessary and frequent" (404) being metaphor. It "gives sense and passion to insensate things" (404). It was by means of metaphor that the "first poets attributed to bodies the being of animate substances, with capacities measured by their own, namely sense and passion, and in this way made fables of them. Thus every metaphor formed is a fable in brief" (404). By contrast, all the metaphors "conveyed by likenesses taken from bodies to signify the operations of abstract minds must date from times when philosophies

were taking shape" (404). It is noteworthy that "in all languages the greater part of the expressions relating to inanimate things are formed by metaphor from the human body and its parts and from the human senses and passions" (405), for example, head for top or the 'brow of a hill' and so on. "Innumerable examples could be collected from all languages" (405), he points out, all being a consequence of the fact that "man in his ignorance makes himself the rule of the universe" (405). Vico argues that by contrast to "rational metaphysics" (405), which "teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them" (405), this "imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by *not* understanding them" (405) because "when man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them" (405).

"In such a logic, sprung from such a metaphysics, the first poets had to give names to things from the most particular and the most sensible ideas. Such ideas are the sources, respectively, of synecdoche and metonymy. Metonymy of agent for act resulted from the fact that names for agents were commoner than names for acts. Metonymy of subject for form and accident was due to inability to abstract forms and qualities from subjects" (406). Metonymy of "cause for effect produced in each case a little fable, in which the cause was imagined as a woman clothed with her effect: ugly Poverty, sad Old Age, pale Death" (406). Synecdoche "developed into metaphor as particulars were elevated into universals or parts united with the other parts together with which they make up their wholes. For example, head is sometimes used in place of man because "in the forests only the head of a man could be seen from a distance" (407).

Irony did not emerge "until the period of reflection, because it is fashioned of falsehood by dint of a reflection which wears the mask of truth" (408). Since the first men "has the simplicity of children, who are truthful by nature, the first fables could not feign anything false, they must therefore have been . . . true narrations" (408). All the tropes (which are reducible to the four mentioned, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony) are less "ingenious inventions of writers" (409) than "necessary modes of expression of all the first poetic nations, and had originally their full native propriety" (409). These expressions became "figurative when, with the further development of the human mind, words were invented which signified abstract forms or genera comprising their species or relating parts with their wholes" (409). The grammarians are wrong, therefore, to believe that "prose speech is proper speech, and poetic speech improper; and that prose speech came first and afterward speech in verse" (409).

Chapter IV Corollaries Concerning the Origins of Languages and Letters . . .

Vico's concern here is with the "origin of languages and letters" (428) (the latter referring to the turning of speech into written texts, literary, historical, etc) which arose together, rather than separately, as many have believed. In a manner which foretends the work of Jacques Derrida, Vico deconstructs the difference posited between the two by arguing that "grammar is defined as the art of speaking, yet *grammata* are letters, so that writing should be defined as the art of writing" (429). His point is that most scholars in are ignorant "of the way in which languages and letters began" (429), failing to "understand how the first nations thought in poetic characters, spoke in fables, and wrote in hieroglyphs" (429). These "should have been the principles, which must by their nature be most certain, of philosophy in its study of human ideas and of philology in its study of human words" (429). Both philosophers and philologists

should all have begun to treat of the origins of languages and letters from the following principles. (1) That the first men of the gentile world conceived ideas of things by imaginative characters of animate and mute substances.

(2) That they expressed themselves by means of gestures or physical objects which had natural relations with the ideas; for example, three ears of grain, or acting as if swinging a scythe three times, to signify three years. (3) That they thus expressed themselves by a language with natural significations . . . [which] had once been spoken in the world . . . [and which] expressed ideas by the nature of the things, that is, by their natural properties. (431).

There were thus three languages corresponding to the three ages of gods, heroes and men: the first language "had been hieroglyphic, sacred or divine; the second, symbolic, by signs or by heroic devices; the third, epistolary, for men at a distance to communicate to each other the current needs of their lives" (432). The meanings of words were not "fixed by convention" (444) but by their "natural origins" (444), that is, via "metaphors drawn from natural objects according to their natural properties or sensible effects" (444).