

THE REHABILITATION OF
MYTH

Vico's 'New Science'

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Introduction

On 14 May 1825, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote a letter to a friend, describing his first impressions of Vico's *New Science*.

I am more and more delighted with G. B. Vico, and if I had (which thank God's good grace I have not) the least drop of Author's blood in my veins, I should twenty times successively in the perusal of the first volume (I have not yet begun the second) have exclaimed: '*Pereant qui ante nos nostra dixeré*'.¹

Coleridge's curse in disguise still haunts Vichian scholars, many of whom must have had felt the same ambivalent sensation of *déjà lu*, as if they had already read – if not actually written – Vico's words. Of all the legends surrounding the man and his work, the legend of Vico the forerunner, the sage who grasped and expressed many truths of the future, has proven the most attractive, though hardly the most constructive, to interpreters of his work. Like Coleridge, many modern readers of the *New Science* believe, genuinely enough, to have discovered in its cryptic formulations affinities, or even outright solutions, to their own research problems. If, as Isaiah Berlin has noted, there is 'a particular danger that attends the fate of rich and profound but inexact and obscure thinkers, namely that their admirers tend to read too much into them, and turn insensibly in the direction of their own thoughts',² then surely Vico and his interpreters have been particularly prone to it. The Vichian industry of recent years has produced some remarkable, if ever more bizarre, samples of comparative studies, all implying Vichian intimations of our modern, all too modern

¹ Quoted from Max H. Fisch, 'The Coleridges, Dr Prati and Vico', *Modern Philology*, 41 (1943), p. 114.

² Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder* (London: Hogarth Press, 1976), p. 95.

theories.³ Vico has been hailed and promoted as the discoverer of almost every major field of knowledge in the humanities and in the social sciences. He is commonly compared with modern thinkers whom he would never have understood and who, all too often, have never bothered to understand him. On the whole, Vico has been made to advocate ideas which he could not possibly have conceived.⁴ My aim in this essay on Vico's *New Science* is to establish what Vico had actually argued for, and thereby to argue for him. And, as the title of this work suggests, my argument is that in his *New Science* Vico sought, and ultimately achieved, a *Rehabilitation of Myth*. In the following remarks I would like to make clear, first of all, what this title of the work means.

The Rehabilitation of Myth: I have borrowed this phrase and its principal connotations from Jean-Pierre Vernant's well-known essay on 'The Reason of Myth'. Vernant's thesis is that

the concept of myth that we have inherited from the Greeks belongs, by reason of its origins and history, to a tradition of thought peculiar to Western civilization in which myth is defined in terms of what is not myth, being opposed first to reality (myth is fiction) and, secondly, to what is rational (myth is absurd). If the development of the study of myth in modern times is to be understood it must be considered in the context of this line of thought and tradition . . . [which would ultimately result in] discovering the authentic and essential nature of that shadowy part of man that is hidden from him. This new attitude was eventually to lead, in various ways, to the rehabilitation of myth. Its 'absurdity' was no longer denounced as a logical scandal; rather, it was considered as a challenge scientific intelligence would have to take up if this other form of intelligence represented by myth was to be understood and incorporated into anthropological knowledge.⁵

My main claim in this work is that this *rehabilitation of myth* was first conceived by Giambattista Vico. Furthermore, I shall argue

³ For a comprehensive survey of this secondary literature, see Andrea Battistini, 'Contemporary Trends in Vichian Studies', in *Vico: Past and Present*, ed. G. Tagliacozzo (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981), pp. 1-47, esp. pp. 16-22 for some pertinent critical commentaries on the excessive 'comparativism' and 'presentism' of Anglo-American scholars.

⁴ These methodological premises are further elaborated by Bruce Haddock, 'Vico: The Problem of Interpretation', in *Vico in Contemporary Thought*, ed. G. Tagliacozzo, M. Mooney, and M. P. Verene (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979), 1, pp. 145-62.

⁵ Jean-Pierre Vernant, 'The Reason of Myth', in *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, tr. J. Lloyd (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 186, 216.

that this was the main aim of Vico's work, and that in so doing he initiated a seminal process of revisionism in various spheres of knowledge. I trust that this perspective, which might seem at first glance to be rather limited in its scope, will prove to be the ideal vantage-point from which to view the enormous range of the *New Science*. This work, then, is neither a comprehensive study of Vico's works, nor even a conclusive commentary on all aspects of his *New Science* (let alone on the vast critical literature about it!), but rather an attempt to elaborate the full meaning and implications of one singular notion that undergirds that work: the definition of myth as 'true narration' (*vera narratio*).

I aim to demonstrate that in this positive definition Vico conceived not only a new theory of classical mythology, but a *New Science* of humanity. Vico's definition is unique because in it he takes *mythology* which had previously been considered as essentially *false* – because its *poetic narrations* of facts seemed to be opposed to either the *rational theories* of philosophy and science, or to the *revealed gospels* of religion, or to the *critical reports* of history – to be *true* in itself. This was the definitive conclusion of his inquiries into the origins of 'the history of human ideas', in which he found out that the archaic and anonymous *mythologeia*, the discourse of tradition which consists in repeating *what they say*, is the main mode of knowledge in which men have actually constituted their civil world (*mondo civile*). In his *New Science* Vico sought to discover the *poetic logic* which permeates this kind of experiential-historical knowledge, which he termed *coscienza*, and, by setting it over against the *rational logic* of the experimental-mathematical knowledge, or *scienza*, of the new sciences of nature, was concerned to establish upon it an equally valid, and ultimately superior, science, a truly *scienza nuova*, of human history. He regarded the archaic myths as the 'true narrations' of this history because he saw that in our (and any other) civilization the fictions of mythology illuminate the 'real world' by constituting or 'prefiguring' all its human actions and institutions: unlike natural occurrences which display law-like, repetitive regularities which are unknowable to us because they are totally alien to our form of life, human occurrences throughout history display forms of action which are knowable to us insofar as we can recognize in them the coherent narrative patterns of the mythical stories with their well-made characters and plots. His comparative study of classical and

primitive myths had led him to believe that these had formed a 'mental language common to the nations' (*una lingua mentale comune a tutte le nazioni*), that is, a symbolic language composed of concrete figures or acts which initially served as vehicles for more abstract and general concepts not yet fully conceived. Vico thought that these archaic images, which he called 'poetic characters', were still embedded in a variety of modern cultural performances – as in linguistic common-places, religious beliefs, social customs, or political rites and institutions:

We find that the principle of these origins both of languages 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. This discovery, which is the master-key of this Science, has cost us the persistent research of almost all our literary life, because with our civilized natures we cannot at all imagine and can understand only by great toil the poetic nature of these men. (NS/34)

In itself, Vico's 'discovery' is akin to what modern theorists of culture would eventually proclaim as their own major discovery, namely – to use Wittgenstein's words – that 'a whole mythology is deposited in our language'.⁶ On a more fundamental level, this discovery suggests that Vico, like many modern interpretive social theorists, could establish his *New Science* only after he had taken a linguistic turn: he saw that inasmuch as the world in which men live is a world of institutions based on language, the task of the human sciences most resembles, and must be modelled on, the interpretation of texts. His concrete *New Science*, let us not forget, is an exercise in the old art of 'philology' – an art which traditionally entailed the formal interpretation of words in classical books, but which was elevated by Vico to a universal method of understanding human beings in past or foreign cultures through their collective symbolic figures and myths. Hence my contention that the definition of myth as 'true narration' is the single most important notion in Vico's entire *New Science* – because this is its interpretive code: the notion, namely, which runs through and illuminates all the other notions in that work. As, in fact, did Vico himself see it: he regarded 'the discovery' of these 'poetic characters' to be 'the master-key of this Science' – because it

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, ed. R. Rhees, tr. A. C. Miles (Retford: The Brynmill Press, 1979), p. 10.

enabled him to decipher the essentially mythopoeic constitution of humanity. Vico's discovery of a new science of the human world may thus be seen as akin to Galileo's discovery of a new science of the natural world in that both stem from the same *linguistic* conception of their respective worlds. For both authors perceived their worlds as 'books' which have been composed, and must be interpreted, according to their own immanent code, or *chiave maestra*: just as Galileo based his new science of physics on the discovery of its constitutive 'mathematical characters', so Vico based his new science of history on the discovery of its constitutive 'poetic characters'. Vico's 'master-key', however, has rarely been used to unlock his own *New Science*. How has the decipherment of ancient mythology enabled him to interpret the entire history of the modern civil world? This issue lies at the heart of this essay.

What I propose in this study, then, is an interpretation of Vico's *New Science* based on his own interpretive principles. In so doing, I follow the methodological advice of Hayden White, who has rightly observed that the main problem with Vico's great work is to decide what it is about. White notes that even though the subject-matter of the *New Science* can be quite clearly defined – it is, he says, 'literally about the ways men make societies and the proper way to comprehend these processes' – its category cannot be easily classified. White argues that Vico's *New Science* is 'one of those master texts of humanistic studies' like Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Nietzsche's *Genealogy*, or Freud's *Totem and Taboo*: these works, he says,

are neither exactly philosophy . . . nor quite literature . . . They are about historical subjects, but are not histories; they deal with problems that interest modern social science, but they are not scientific in method. What such master texts seem to be about, over and above their manifest subject, is interpretation itself . . . they serve as repositories of interpretive strategies by which to make sense of texts in general, themselves included.⁷

These are the basic thematic and methodic assumptions which govern this essay. In singling out Vico's notion of myth for such thorough – and seemingly exclusive – treatment, I do not mean to

⁷ Hayden White, Review Essay on Leon Pompa, *Vico: A Study of the 'New Science'*, in *History and Theory*, 15 (1976), pp. 198–9.

suggest that other issues in that work are less important. Rather, I want to show how, in Vico's scheme, practically all human creations (*cose umane*) can, and indeed must, be traced back and reappraised according to their mythical components. Therefore, while I shall not treat in detail certain major topics in the *New Science* – such as, for example, Rhetorics or Law – in detail, I trust that the elaboration of Myth will clarify the basic heuristic principles and strategies by which to assess these and other matters in that work.

More generally still, I think that there is much truth in the astute observation of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who once said that any great thinker conjures up one, and only one, original and inexhaustible idea, which he then spends his whole life coming to terms with: '*Et c'est pourquoi il a parlé toute sa vie*'.⁸ This observation seems particularly apt in the case of Vico, if only for the reason that he himself perceived his life and work to have unfolded in that way. From around 1720, he tells us, his 'intellectual life' was totally dominated by one monumental attempt – to retrace the process of civilization among the gentiles in and through the minds of those who experienced and carried it out:

To discover the way in which this first human thinking arose in the gentile world, we encountered exasperating difficulties which have cost us the persistent research of a good twenty years. [We had] to descend from these human and refined natures of ours to those quite wild and savage natures, which we cannot at all imagine and can comprehend only with great effort. (NS/338)

These words reverberate throughout the *New Science*, as well as in the vast literature on that work – including this essay. It was this initial perception of the mental distance that separates us from our primitive ancestors which set Vico on his descent into what he called the 'deplorable obscurity of the beginnings of the nations and into the innumerable variety of their customs'. Having duly recognized the fact that because of this distance an immediate entry into their alien culture, by purely intuitive and merely 'imaginative' means, is impossible, he sought to discover in their cultural performances certain moral codes, or 'principles' of

⁸ Henry Bergson, *Oeuvres*, ed. A. Robinet (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970), p. 1347.

behaviour, which are still understandable to us. These 'principled' modes of human life, when recognized as such in their cultures as well as in 'the modifications of our own human mind', could then point to what has become the truly 'common nature of the nations', that which unites, as it were, the ancient-primitive world of the pagans with the modern, 'human and refined' world of Christian Europe in one tradition of humanity. Where the other dominant cultural ideologies of his time – Christianity and the Enlightenment – saw only discontinuity between the false superstitions of the ancients and the true faith or correct reasoning of the moderns, Vico perceived a certain underlying community and continuity between 'the obscure and fabulous' times and the 'enlightened' age – that of the 'poetic speech', or *mythologein*: 'The poetic speech which our poetic logic has helped us to understand continued for a long time into the historical period, much as great and rapid rivers continue far into the sea, keeping sweet the waters borne on by the force of their flow' (NS/412).

Vico's theory of myth has long been recognized by scholars of myth as a major contribution to the modern science of mythology. And yet, on the whole, they have commonly waved it off with this gesture of recognition. Thus, for example, Ernst Cassirer, who repeatedly praised Vico as 'the real discoverer of the myth', did not deal with Vico's actual writings on the topic.⁹ As for Vichian scholars, while most of them have paid due attention to the mythological inquiries in his work, they have generally dismissed them as fatuous and quite irrelevant to the more serious theories in his work.¹⁰ Following Croce's idealistic method of distinguishing between 'what is living and what is dead' in masterpieces of the past – by which he sought, in the case of *New Science*, to disregard most of the philological (and least 'certain') assumptions in that

⁹ Ernst Cassirer, *The Problem of Knowledge*, tr. W. H. Woglom and C. W. Hendel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 296.

¹⁰ Of the many works which deal specifically with Vico's theory of myth, I found the following most valuable: Gianfranco Cantelli, *Mente corpo linguaggio: Saggio sull'interpretazione vichiana del mito* (Florence: Sansoni, 1987); Guido Dorflès, *L'estetica del mito; Da Vico a Wittgenstein* (Milan: Mursia, 1968); Frank Manuel, 'Vico: the "giganti" and Their Joves', *The Eighteenth-Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), pp. 149–67; David Bidney, 'Vico's New Science of Myth', in *Vico: International Symposium*, ed. G. Tagliacozzo and H. White (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), pp. 259–77.

work, and to concentrate solely on its refined – and genuinely ‘true’ – philosophical conclusions,¹¹ many interpreters have come to completely ignore Vico’s own proclamation that he had derived his ‘true’ philosophical ideas from ‘certain’ philological facts. The whole lot of mythological interpretations, etymological associations, scriptural manifestations, and such like oddities which Vico regarded as the ‘philological proofs’ of his philosophical and historical arguments, have thus been dismissed by his modern interpreters as no more than those topical interests which have since proved to be not just superficial in themselves, but really unnecessary to the work in the first place. The *New Science*, so runs their argument, just happens to be a work in which the most insightful ideas and conclusions are often derived from the most abstruse factual premises. This attitude is prevalent in the much too limited way they have commonly treated the mythological stuff in this work. As Gianfranco Cantelli has recently noted,

The common tendency of the majority of Vico’s interpreters has been to approach the problem [of myth] from a point of view too exclusively aesthetic and linguistic, which has left obscured the perhaps decisive fact that, for Vico, the investigation of the origins of poetry grew out of a predominantly historical inquiry and that his true intention was less to establish the manner in which poetic language was born than to examine the function of myths, to clarify the origins of religion, and to determine its role in the civil development of mankind.¹²

Why have all those scholars shown so little interest in, or understanding of, Vico’s mythological inquiries? The reason, I think, lies in Vico’s peculiar ‘philological’ mode of interpretation, in his baffling ‘style’. It seems that, like most common readers of the *New Science*, they too have found Vico’s poetic elaborations of mythological idioms and images quite obscure, at best speculative, and all too often just nonsensical. His philological style, indeed, presents endless obstacles to a systematic study of his theory of myth and yet, at the same time, this style in itself conveys a certain message. In an era in which writers came to regard ‘style’ as an

¹¹ Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, tr. R. G. Collingwood (N.Y.: Russell and Russell, 1964).

¹² Gianfranco Cantelli, ‘Myth and Language in Vico’, in *Vico’s Science of Humanity*, ed. G. Tagliacozzo and D. P. Verene (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 48.

expressive rather than merely decorative mode; and believed, in Buffon's famous words, that *Le style est l'homme même*, the literary form and rhetorical strategies of Vico – who was, after all, a Royal Professor of Rhetoric and Eloquence – were surely purposeful. Against the fashionable tradition of pure philosophical reasoning, highlighted in his time by Descartes' corroboration of 'clear and distinct ideas' only, Vico moulded his *New Science* in a different, and consciously contrarious, fashion: he not only thought out a new science but also worked it out in a new scientific style. The argumentative style of the *New Science* – its poetics – is an argument in – and about – itself; it is only when we know *how* Vico argues that we can fully understand *what* he argues for. Or, to make the point in Vico's own terms, it appears that although his first heuristic rule – in which he states that 'theories must start from the point where the matter of which they treat first began to take shape' (NS/314) – has been duly recognized by interpreters of the *New Science* as its most fundamental methodological postulate, it has not been properly applied by them to this work itself.¹³ Concerned as they were with the *theories*, they have rarely if ever concentrated on the original raw *matter* from which Vico carved these theories – the archaic mythological texture. This, they assumed, was only the medium, not the message. My entire counter-argument is perhaps best summed up in Marshall MacLuhan's well-known dictum: 'The medium is the message'. The theoretical message of the *New Science* is already included in, and must therefore be elucidated directly from, its mythological examples and assertions: it consists in the activity of *mythopoeisis* itself, in the recognition that all our cultural creations, including the *New Science* itself, are recreations of myths.

Does this mean, then, that Vico consciously composed his *New Science* as a *New Myth*? This romantic hypothesis, provocative as it is (and is probably meant to be), must be considered, if only for the reason that some respectable interpreters of the *New Science*, from Francisco De Sanctis to Norman O. Brown, have seriously argued for it: as they saw it, this is what Vico must have meant to do were he loyal to his innermost convictions about the value of myth-making – not only in antiquity but also, and especially, in the

¹³ The exception here is Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

modern times.¹⁴ Though I find this suggestion intriguing, I think it must be rejected for the simple reason that Vico perceived his work, as he actually defined it, as a 'science of mythology' (NS/51), and not as a mythology of science. Unlike his predecessors in the Renaissance and his followers among the Romantics, Vico did not seek to work out a new mythology, but rather to clarify the work of myth in our minds and cultures. His attitude might well be summed up in the words of Hans Blumenberg, who by way of explaining the title of his massive study – *Work on Myth* – says that 'only work *on* myth – even if it is the work of finally reducing it – makes the work *of* myth manifest'.¹⁵

In any case, the assumption that Vico has really come of age only in our time, when, luckily for him, his archaic philological concerns have been *aufgehoben*, is only half true. It is true, indeed, that he remained largely unknown in his life-time. But it would be more accurate to say that he was ignored rather than misunderstood or rejected by his contemporaries. His text baffled his contemporaries, as it still amazes us, because its subject matter – the distinctly 'poetic' way in which men both made their 'civil world' and 'could come to know it' – was worked-out in a most unusual, but very appropriate, poetic fashion. And if anything, the oddity of his 'philological proofs' has not been diminished, let alone resolved, by what we take to be our purer understanding of its intrinsic philosophical message. We simply do not pay as much attention or respect to them as did some old-fashioned 'philologist' readers in the past – readers like Coleridge and Michelet, Grote and Auerbach, and above all Joyce who did not believe in Vico's – or any other – science, but revelled in his linguistic fantasies. We think we understand better than earlier generations what this text is all about because we have taken far greater interpretive liberty to give a rational rendering of its poetic ideas, to recast its crude images and assertions in our own

¹⁴ Francesco de Sanctis likens Vico's *New Science* to Dante's *Divine Comedy*: 'Bristling with myths, with etymologies, with symbols, with allegories, and pregnant with presentiments and divinations, it is not less great than the "sacred poem" itself; it is the work of a fantasy excited by philosophical genius and fortified by erudition, and has all the physiognomy of a great revelation' (*History of Italian Literature*, tr. J. Redfern, (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1959), II, pp. 807–8. In *Closing Time* (N.Y.: Random House, 1973), Norman O. Brown likens Vico's interpretation to Joyce's recreation of mythology.

¹⁵ Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, tr. R. M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), p. 118.

enlightened terms and concepts. And in many cases, especially where Vico does not use facts or figurative examples merely to 'illustrate' his seemingly deeper and more conceptually refined ideas (as, in his view, Plato did), but really works his way through and infers his ideas from these materials (as, in his view, Tacitus did), when, in short, he reasons wholly philologically, not about words but, as it were, with and through them – then, it seems, our tendency to over-intellectualize him lets us down. By trying to read too much into his utterly superficial poetical musings we miss what was perhaps immediately and plainly legible to less sophisticated, but more finely-tuned, readers in the past. One of the guiding heuristic principles of this essay is that there are in Vico's work many hidden – or rather already forgotten – perspectives, such that had been more properly recognized and worked upon by readers in earlier generations, and very often more by wayward Vichian artists than by meticulous Vichian scholars. A major task of this essay will be to regain these lost perspectives on – and in – the *New Science*.

To sum up: All those modern scholars who have dismissed Vico's obsessive immersion in mythological examples and interpretations as antiquated, as no more than a 'medium', the merely material examples which Vico used to illustrate his deeper and more significant ideas, have, I think, missed the main point of the *New Science*. They did not ask themselves the simple question: why myth? Why would Vico spend so much energy – 'almost all our literary life' as he puts it (NS/34) – trying to make sense of this massive repository of archaic images and tales? The answer, as I have indicated above, must be, that Vico believed that modern man, being the inheritor of former modes of thought, speech, and behaviour, still lives by these examples. In his *New Science* Vico expressed this notion in one memorable and eminently revealing oration, surely the most famous passage and the one that has been quoted and interpreted more than any other in that work, but rarely, I would argue, in its right – and only meaningful – context:

But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on

this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations, or civil world, which, since men made it, men could come to know. (NS/331).

Typically enough, most commentators who have elaborated on this passage concentrated on its seminal epistemological conclusion, on what has become known as 'Vico's principle of knowledge' – the *verum ipsum factum* – and its significance for the foundation of the human sciences. Clearly, however, the 'truth' about the autonomous self-making of man, society and history, that which Vico and his interpreters celebrate as his 'great discovery', is rather trivial, and certainly not new. In fact, as Vico himself hints, it is in many ways as old as philosophy itself. Its basic principle of humanism was first intimated by certain pre-socratic philosophers, and was thereafter reiterated time and again in various forms by many ancient, medieval, and Renaissance theories concerning the 'dignity' of man and civic society. During the seventeenth century, with the eclipse of the Christian world view, this theory of human self-making acquired greater vigour through better epistemology and more accurate anthropo-history. Allowing that Vico's 'truth' was rather common – both in itself, and among his contemporaries, one must ask, in what sense, then, if any, Vico could seriously claim to have discovered it, and whether his discovery rendered it especially important. This is precisely the point: I think that the significance of Vico's 'truth' lies not so much in *what* Vico claims, but rather in *why* and *how* he does so. In other words, Vico's 'lesson' still merits consideration but less for itself, than for the means and materials from which he drew it. Like any other general philosophical discovery in the *New Science* this too becomes fully meaningful only in its concrete philosophical context-of-discovery.

And so, when we turn again to the above-quoted passage, it becomes clear that what is so patently lacking in those modern attempts to explicate its message is a consideration of its formal and imagistic reasoning. It is clear, to begin with, that Vico here construes his entire argument syllogistically, i.e., he infers its major philosophical conclusion – 'that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men' – from certain philological observations he had made about its origination in 'the earliest

antiquity' of mankind. He strongly implies that he has actually discovered something in their crude way of making and knowing *their* world which is crucial to our refined way of knowing and making *our* world. Our ability to understand *how* these men 'had made' their world in the first place guarantees that 'we could come to know' *what* our world is. We can do it insofar as we are the inheritors of their archaic patterns of knowing and making things. In order to know the human world we must know its constitutive myths. And this is precisely what Vico did and instructed us to do:

Truth is sifted from falsehood in everything that has been preserved for us through long centuries by those vulgar traditions which, since they have been preserved for so long a time and by entire peoples, must have had a public ground of truth. The great fragments of antiquity, hitherto useless to science because they lay begrimed, broken, and scattered, shed great light when cleaned, pieced together, and restored. (NS/356-7)

The 'Truth' referred to in this passage is that which is most essential to the work as a whole, the truth namely about *how men had made their civil world and why, therefore, men could come to know it*. Vico repeatedly says what this truth is, but here, rather enigmatically, he goes further by specifying precisely how and where he had found it. He claims to have discovered this 'truth' in those 'fragments of antiquity' – the ancient myths – which enabled the ancients, 'who were all by nature poets', to create the human world, as they might still enable us, the new scientists, to come to know it – inasmuch as these myths still persist in our minds and cultures.

Such views as I ascribe to Vico are nowadays labeled 'revisionist'. In view of the fact that this adjective has been so commonly – and variably – applied to all kinds of political and historical theories, it is hard to know whether the *New Science* deserves to be so praised or condemned. If revisionism means merely 'going back to the sources' and a re-evaluation of orthodox views according to new facts or theories, then Vico's work might well be considered revisionary, but then so too could countless other works, including those which Vico opposed. It seems, therefore, that in order to get the true meaning of revisionism as a methodico-ideological theory of interpretation we have to adhere more closely to its etymological connotations, and to accentuate its conservative, and even reactionary, premises. The first and

most common assumption of all the revisionists is that human affairs are intricate and uncertain because they are always liable to be disrupted by chance, ignorance and error of egotistical desires, so that what happens in history is often unforeseen and undesired. This inevitable heterogeneity-of-ends defies, in principle, all kinds of rigid logical, and especially teleological, schemes of social evolution, whether those of the politicians' foresight or those of the historians' hindsight. They thus oppose the rational-liberal theories of humankind and society and their concomitant progressivist accounts of history with narratives which reveal religious beliefs and moral values, social practices and political institutions to be subservient to historical events and processes. Revisionism thus entails a re-evaluation of apparently scientific explanations by more casual considerations, the reduction of universal theories to local practices and accidents, the elevation of poetical sensibilities over against logical ratiocinations – both among the historical agents as among those who study them. Seen in this way revisionism would imply not so much a modern view of the past but a view of modernity from past perspectives. For the revisionist considers human beings to be essentially traditional, living in immemorial and largely impersonal structures of meaning, of which they are only dimly aware, and which they cannot, nor should, change by radical intellectual or political acts. Believing thus that behind all the forms of modern rationalism there lurk past and continuous traditions of belief, the revisionist scholars attempt to expose in them the poetic images and habitual practices which resist progressive, never mind revolutionary, categories; they seek, as a rule, to read historical documents as if from the point of view of those who were immersed in the very process which later scholars describe in their own modern terms and theories.

Vico's critical expositions of all kinds of conceptual anachronism, the fallacy which he neatly termed as that 'conceit of the scholars . . . who will have it that what they know is as old as the world' (NS/127) – renders him a 'revisionist' in that sense – though, of course, a revisionist in all but name. His deconstruction of rational modern theories of mind, man, and society – such as, for example, the Cartesian *cogito*, neo-Epicurean atomism, or social contract – into their poetical components, further confirms this view. As does his socio-historical narration of the evolution of mankind from barbarism to civilization 'out of ferocity, avarice,

and ambition, the three vices which run throughout the human race' and 'which could certainly destroy all mankind on the face of the earth' (NS/132), a narration which does not display civilization as a linear and always progressive process of enlightenment through Revelation or Reason, but as a cyclical and occasionally regressive process of courses and recourses from and to barbarism, through Myth. It is for these and similar reasons, and according to these terms, that I present Vico's *New Science* as a series of 'revisions' of four modern theories – of Science, Civilization, Mythology, and History – which cover those spheres of knowledge on which he sought to establish his new science of humanity. In his revision of all these theories Vico followed the principal rule which he set for all students of humanity, whose 'theories must start from the point where the matter of which they treat first began to take shape', and which I, in my theory of his theory, follow as well.