

GIAMBATTISTA VICO : AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PIONEER.¹

BY C. E. VAUGHAN, M.A., LITT.D.

EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS.

THE man of whom I am about to speak, Giambattista Vico, was born in 1668, the year after the publication of *Paradise Lost*, and died in 1744, the year of the death of Pope. He was almost unknown during his life ; he remained unknown for nearly a century after his death. Michelet, the great French historian, was the first scholar to form any just estimate of his importance : to comprehend, even remotely, the significance of the ideas which he flung upon the world, of the vast fabric of learning and criticism which he built upon them. Close on a century has passed since Michelet (1828) rediscovered the man who already had lain for nearly a century in his grave ; and I doubt whether, even now, more than a handful of scholars, beyond the bounds of Italy, are aware of what the world owes to him : of the manifold directions in which he anticipated the most fruitful developments of modern thought, the most pregnant results of modern criticism and research.

He was above all things a pioneer. He opened a new page in political philosophy, and incidentally in the study of Greek and Roman History. He founded the study of Comparative Mythology and the kindred subjects. He was the first to attempt what has since been called a Philosophy of History. He was the herald of that movement which, in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, gave a new birth to European poetry.

How, in the short time before us, can I hope to justify this estimate ? to convey to you any notion of the vast field which this obscure scholar made his own ?

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Let me begin by recalling to your mind the general trend of thought and feeling in Western Europe at the time when he was growing to manhood : the broad outlines which the inner world, the world of thought and imagination, presented to a man whose life covered the last third of the seventeenth century and nearly the first half of the eighteenth.

In the field of poetry, of imaginative thought and temper, we all know the main features, the prevailing atmosphere, of the time. It was the age of Dryden and Pope, in England ; of Boileau and his dearly prized "good sense," his "legislation of Parnassus," in France ; of a tribe of forgotten poetasters who feebly followed in the tracks laid down by Pope or Boileau, in Germany, Italy and Spain. It was an age, that is, when Poetry was coming more and more to renounce its own nature ; to forget its true task which is to create, to "body forth the forms of things unseen" ; and to content itself with reproducing, still more with analyzing, material avowedly given to it from without : in a word, an age when Poetry, in the higher and nobler sense of the word, was for the moment sunk in a deep sleep.

Turn to the field of speculative thought, and we can trace the working of much the same forces ; though, for reasons which will suggest themselves to every one, with far less fatal results. It was the age of Hobbes and Locke, leading on, with inexorable logic, to the age of Hume and the sceptics, of Voltaire and the Encyclopedists. It was an age, once again, in which reason came more and more to renounce, or rather flatly to deny, its creative faculty : more and more to resign itself to the humbler task of registering and analyzing the material given through the senses from without : an age, therefore, of materialism, first veiled then exultant, as regards the sources and scope of man's knowledge ; of pure hedonism or utilitarianism, as regards his active existence, his motives and purposes as a moral being.

Now, against all this Vico was, by instinct, in stark rebellion. It is his historical importance to have raised, to have been the first to raise, the standard of revolt against it. Others, no doubt, eventually followed in his steps : some of them, perhaps, of a genius yet greater, all of them with an influence much more powerful and far-reaching, than his. But the earliest of these, Rousseau, did not begin to write until five years after Vico's death ; he did not reach the full height of his powers until a dozen years later (1762). In other words, Vico, whose

chief work (*La Scienza Nuova*) was first published in 1725,¹ fore-stalled the earliest of his followers by at least a generation. And if we take the more special achievements of his genius, his work as pioneer in Comparative Mythology, his work as interpreter of early Roman History, his work in Homeric criticism, we see that he fore-stalled Niebuhr by at least three-quarters of a century, Wolf by much the same interval, and Jakob Grimm by more than a century. All these men, apparently in complete ignorance of their forerunner, were engaged in exploring the mines of thought and learning which Vico had laid open a hundred years, more or less, before they entered on their task. In the whole history of literature I know of nothing quite parallel to this.

If anything could increase our surprise at so strange a portent, it is the surroundings in which Vico was born and bred. He was an Italian : an Italian of the days when Italy, once in the vanguard of thought and imaginative creation, had sunk to compete with Spain for the place of the most corrupt and nerveless race of Western Europe. More than that : he was a Neapolitan ; and of all the Italian States, Naples—overrun by brigands, its sovereignty divided between a race of alien degenerates, the Spanish Bourbons, and a native rabble of sturdy beggars—was the worst governed and the most backward. Who could have supposed that such a community was capable of giving birth to the most independent thinker of his time ? to the man whose mission it was, as we can now see, to revolutionize the intellectual and imaginative temper of all Europe ?—

Via prima salutis,
Quod minime reris, Graia pandetur ab urbe.

Yes, here, in the very backwash of an outworn civilization, lived and died the author of the *New Science* : an obscure professor of Rhetoric, eking out his scanty pittance by giving private lessons in grammar and composing fulsome eulogies of Popes, Cardinals and Arch-Duchesses.

I. Such were the surroundings of the worker. Let us now turn to see him at work. And first—for that is the main purpose of the *New Science*—at work as reformer of Political Philosophy. What

¹ The Second Version, which is an entirely new book, was published in 1730. A revision of this Version was published in the year of Vico's death (1744) ; it is this which forms the text of the Second Version in Ferrari's Edition (6 Vols., Milan, 1854).

had been the leading ideas, what the outstanding results, of those who had toiled in this field during the century or so before Vico ? of Hobbes and Locke, on the one hand ; of Spinoza, on the other ?

The practical conclusions of these men were widely different. All, however, were agreed on at least one point : they all accepted the theory of a Social Contract. They all assumed, that is, an original "state of nature"—a state in which every individual was wholly independent of all the rest ; then a contract between these isolated individuals : a contract providing for the establishment of civil society and a settled government. But, as you are doubtless aware, the theory of Contract, like most other theories which for a time find general acceptance, was a theory which lent itself to the most motley interpretations. It was a blank form, which could adapt itself to the most diverse assumptions and be made to yield the most contradictory conclusions. In the hands of Hobbes, it led to pure despotism, the most unmitigated despotism that the wit of man has ever conceived. In the hands of Locke, it was a charter of freedom, of freedom based upon the natural rights of the individual. In the hands of Spinoza, finally, it became the pure gospel of utilitarianism, the theory which regards civil society as formed and sustained solely by the play of individual interests.

Yet all these theories have one assumption in common : the assumption that the natural state of man is a state of individual isolation. All of them, therefore, are at bottom markedly individualist. This is so even with Hobbes whose individuals are, in the state of nature, more completely isolated from—indeed, more hostile to—each other than in any other form of this Protean theory ; and for whom, even after civil society, the great Leviathan, has taken shape, they still remain equally isolated : herded, rather than ~~held~~ held, together only by common terror of the tyrant's sword and, because isolated, destined to succumb all the more helplessly before the tyrant's unlimited power. It is so still more obviously with Locke and Spinoza : with the one, in virtue of his individual rights—the fountain-head of modern individualism ; with the other, in virtue of his insistence upon the all-sufficiency of individual interests.

Now to all these theories, alike to their form and to their matter, alike to their Contract machinery and to the ideas which lay behind it, Vico was in violent hostility. And his main ground of complaint

is that all alike—machinery, ideas, assumptions—are flagrantly un-historical.

And firstly for the machinery. The state of nature, with all its apparatus of natural rights and individual isolation ; the contract concluded by men who, from the nature of the case, cannot be supposed to have known what a promise means : all these things manifestly belong to the realm of fiction : they have no relation to the realities of history or to any thing remotely resembling the realities of history. They are not only against all the evidence available, but against all probability. We may go further : we may say that they are not only improbable, but impossible.

And what about the ideas behind the machinery ? At this point we part company with Hobbes. His conclusions were too extravagant ; and Vico, very wisely, does not hold them worth powder and shot. He concerns himself solely with Locke and Spinoza, assailing them, as before, mainly on historical grounds.

We begin with Locke and his theory of natural rights : that theory which did not die with Locke and his disciples, but is still the theory of popular philosophy at the present day. It is true, Vico admits, that men are often moved to fight for their rights. But, if you ask what those rights were in the early ages of recorded history, you will find that they are precisely *not* the rights of the individual—rights the same always, everywhere and for all—but the rights of a class : the rights, for instance, of the Patricians as against the Plebeians, of the Plebeians as against the Patricians. And even in our own day, we may add, are things so very different ? Now, the rights of classes stand in the sharpest contrast with the rights of individuals. So far from being the same for all, they necessarily involve a conflict of claims ; and the rights of one class are often, truly or falsely, taken to be the wrongs of another.

The truth is that the idea of natural rights, common to man “ as he is man ” is not in any sense a part of man’s original heritage. It is not a spontaneous outgrowth of man’s instincts, of his practical reason ; it is the creation of the philosophers. It is not the gift of what Vico calls *sapienza volgare*, the wisdom of the crowd, but of *sapienza riposta*, the recondite wisdom of the sages. It was first invented by the Stoics and the Roman Jurists. It played no large part in human affairs, it had no wide influence upon human conduct, until the ap-

proach of the seventeenth century. It did not finally establish itself until, at the end of that century, it was crystallized by Locke and made current by his great authority.

We pass now to Spinoza, whose political treatises were well known to Vico, and whose theory was a predestined target for his arrows. Rejecting the doctrine of Rights, Spinoza threw himself wholeheartedly upon that of interests : working out, with extraordinary power and thoroughness, that utilitarian theory of Politics which, from three-quarters of a century to a century later, was to be restated by Hume, Helvétius and Bentham. "A company of shop-keepers, a city of hucksters" is Vico's contemptuous verdict upon this conception of the State. And I am afraid we must say it was well merited. For if experience shows anything it is this : that, if men are often governed by their interests, they are much more often, and much more tyrannously, governed by their passions, by their duties, by the traditions—social, moral and religious—in which they have been nurtured and which, subject to modification in the present, have come down to them, doubtless with many changes, from an incalculable past. The utilitarian theory, when you come to consider it, is hardly less abstract, hardly less unhistorical, than the theory of Rights. The world is peopled not by calculating machines, but by men of flesh and blood.

Against both these theories, therefore—against the champions of utility hardly less than against the champions of natural Rights—the weapon employed by Vico is the appeal to History : the appeal to the history of ideas in the one case ; the appeal to the universal experience of civil communities in the other. And when we turn, as we now do, to consider the rival and more tenable theory which he built up for himself, it is once more the same story. It is the historical method—the historical method still more rigorously applied—that he follows. In so doing, he gives an entirely new turn to Political Philosophy ; he opens the vein of inquiry which was afterwards to be deepened and widened by Montesquieu and Burke.

Pioneer as he was, it was only to be expected that he should have occasional relapses : that he should sink back now and again into the realm of fiction from which he was struggling to escape. But these blemishes are rare and, when he is once fairly started on his way, they are a thing of the past. In the sketch that I am now about to give of

his political theory, you will doubtless recognize the marks they have left ; and I will leave it to you to discount them, as you think fit.

What, he asks, are the facts that meet us in the early history of the race with which we are most familiar ? in the political organization, and in the Family life, of primitive Rome ?

On the one hand, we are confronted with two alien races, a race of masters and a race of dependents, almost of thralls : a superior race, with exclusive powers, exclusive customs, exclusive gods of its own ; and a subject race, more than half conscious of its own inferiority, with no Family organization such as the dominant race saw fit to recognize, with no powers and no rights as against their masters, and either excluded from the religion and worship of their betters, or admitted only upon sufferance. And a like state of things is revealed by what we know of the early history of Greece : by the Helots of Sparta and the vast slave population of Attica, on the one side ; on the other side, by the existence of Families who called themselves Eupatridæ, Patricians, who, like the Patricians of Rome, held the monopoly at first of all the offices, and until comparatively late times of all the priestly offices, in these and other States of primitive Greece. It is to be paralleled, in all probability, by the early records of the Hebrews : by the herdsmen of Lot and Abraham, by the retainers who followed the wanderings of Jacob—"With my staff I passed over Jordan, and now I am become two bands"—and, at a later age, by the Gibeonites, admitted as hewers of wood and drawers of water to the Children of Israel, and by "the stranger that is within thy gates" of the Ten Commandments.

On the other hand, we are confronted with a very startling form of Family life, reproducing on a small scale that sharp conflict of alien elements which was exhibited on a large scale by the State. To each of the dominant Families, that is, was attached a large number of dependents, or Clients, whom Vico appears to identify with the Plebeians, or subject race, of the State considered as a whole. Whether so identified or no, these were at any rate for many purposes under the jurisdiction of the Head of the Family and were regarded as making up, together with the Patrician element, the Family in that wide sense which, as the word *famulus* shows, it habitually bore to the Romans. There is the further peculiarity that, as is implied in the above statement, each Family was largely independent of the community and

of the laws accepted by the community, as is shown by the *patria potestas*, the right of life and death possessed by the Head of the Family over its members : one of the strangest phenomena, surely, in the early history of mankind. It is to be paralleled possibly by the sacrifice of Iphigenia among the primitive Greeks and of Jephthah's daughter among the Hebrews : certainly by the Phœnician practice of making their sons and their daughters pass through the fire to Moloch :—

Et Pœnei solitei sos sacrificare puellos,

in the indignant cry of Ennius.

From these undoubted facts of historical ages Vico argues back to two successive stages which must, in his view, have preceded them—which are, as he holds, presupposed by them—in the prehistoric development of man. The earlier of these stages is that which gives us the first emergence of man from utter savagery : the first rude beginnings of what, for want of a better term, we may call civilization. The latter gives us the period, long or short, which intervened between those first origins and the foundation of civil communities : that is, of the historical State.

His account of the former stage, like all other attempts to solve the riddle of origins, is necessarily a web of fictions ; and it would be idle to follow him through all his labyrinth of surmises. It is enough if we pick out his most salient results : those which have the closest bearing upon the vital problems of Political Philosophy.

He infers, then, that the dominant race of early Roman and other records must have been descendants of those who first tore themselves from the life of "lawless vagrancy," the "bestial communism of goods and women," which he assumes to have been the lot of mankind during the age which immediately followed the Flood : a life in which, save for his outward form, there was nothing to show that man differed from the beasts. These earliest ancestors of the dominant race, these pioneers of all subsequent progress, must, Vico supposes, have been more delicately framed, more sensitively organized, than the common herd of mankind. Thanks to this favoured nature, they were capable of feeling awe and shame before the manifestations of a higher Power ; capable of recoiling in horror from the degradation in which they had allowed themselves to lie sunk ; capable, therefore, of wrenching themselves from it and becoming—or rather, of taking the step which would

eventually lead them to become—for the first time reasonable beings and men. Accordingly, each of them, as the new light was flashed upon him, withdrew from the state of lawless vagrancy, to live apart from his former miserable companions, each with his own chosen woman, in some cave or clearing of the primeval forest ; leaving the rest to wallow in the slough of bestiality from which he had escaped. This was the first beginning of the Family and, with it, of all that upon which the subsequent progress of mankind has been providentially built. This too, according to Vico, is the true “state of nature” for man : this, and not the life of promiscuous wandering which he had shared in common with the beasts. With this, therefore, we pass to the second stage of man’s prehistoric existence, as conceived by Vico, which is essentially the age of the Family.

What, we ask, are the characteristic marks of the Family thus first established. Outwardly it was monogamous ; it was a complete unit in itself, utterly unconnected with any other Family and, still more, with any larger, more inclusive, community such as the Tribe, the City, or the State. In Vico’s emphatic language, it was “monastic, Cyclopean and monarchic”. Inwardly—and this is yet more important—it was bound up with a strict code of religious observances, with a strict code of moral duties : both of them enforced by the Head of the Family, the Father, who declared the will of the Gods, conducted the sacrifices and rigorously, not to say cruelly, punished all offences whether against the religious, or against the moral, tradition : who was, in short, to use Vico’s language, at once Prophet, Priest and King of his own household. It is upon the moral discipline of the primitive Family, upon the essentially religious character of the primitive Family, that Vico never ceases to insist ; and that for reasons which will at once suggest themselves to you and which, moreover, will abundantly appear in the sequel. Relics of this state of things, it must be added, are to be found on the one hand in the *patria potestas*, of which I have already spoken ; on the other, in the Family Gods, the Lares and Penates, of historical Rome ; or again in the conception of Jehovah, as the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob in *Genesis* and *Exodus*.

From what has been said, it is clear that, in the beginning, the “monastic” Family rested purely upon ties of blood : it was the Head of the household and his blood-descendants, and it was nothing

else. But the historic Family, as we have seen, included—at least in Rome and perhaps elsewhere also—an alien element : an element of dependents, clients, serfs or thralls, as the case may be. Whence was this alien element drawn ? and in what manner was it incorporated ?

As for the answer to the first of these questions, there can be no manner of doubt. The only possible source of such dependents, Vico urges, is from the “lawless vagrants” who were left to wander promiscuously through “the vast forest of the earth,” after their betters had escaped. But how were they brought to heel ? In the abstract, there are two possible ways : either by conquest or by voluntary surrender. The former must at once be rejected. The war between the settled Families and the lawless vagrants must have been a war to the knife ; any prisoners taken by the settlers must have been sacrificed on the spot in cold blood : *Saturni hostiæ*, according to the grim phrase of Plautus. There remains nothing but the way of voluntary surrender : sporadic surrender on the part of these self-accused outcasts to those whom they felt to be their betters, and on terms dictated solely by the pride or avarice of their new masters. So accepted, they were gradually embodied as an integral part of the Cyclopean Family : but, once more it must be insisted, on conditions of utter dependence and subjection.

What facts, we ask, can be brought in confirmation of this hypothesis : the hypothesis of the independent Family, on the one hand ? of its two distinct elements, a dominant race and a subject race, upon the other ? In support of the former, we might appeal to two things : firstly to what the Old Testament actually records of the Fathers of the Jewish race : which, though not (in the strict sense of the term) prehistoric—for there are the records—refers at least to the period before the foundation of the Jewish State. I speak of the wanderings of Abraham and his household, the like wanderings of his son and grandson, the fact that none of these had either a settled home, or acknowledged any human authority above their own. Or we might appeal, as Vico does, to the tradition which lingered among Homer’s Greeks concerning the Cyclopes : a tradition which is used both by Plato and Aristotle in support of the same inference as Vico’s :—

θεμιστεύει δε ἕκαστος
παίδων ἢ δ’ ἀλόχων, οὐδ’ ἀλλήλων ἀλέγουσι.¹

¹ *Odyssey*, ix., 114-115. See Plato, *Laws*, III., iii. ; Aristotle, *Politics*, I., i.

Of the latter hypothesis—the existence, in prehistoric as in historic times, of two separate and hostile elements in the Family—he found many confirmations in the primitive Greek myths : for instance, in the story of Cadmus, his interpretation of which I hope to give in another connection. To these may be added one furnished by a famous passage of the *Odyssey*. When Ulysses, in the world of shadows, hails the shade of Achilles as “prince among the dead,” Achilles answers that even the meanest earthly life is a better thing than death. And what is the lowest depth of misery that he can think of ? It is the lot of the “landless master’s serf” :—

Rather I choose ingloriously to bear
A load of ills, and draw the vital air,
The slave of some poor hind that toils for bread,
Than reign the sceptred monarch of the dead.¹

So much for Vico’s inference as to the character of the prehistoric Family : or rather of the prehistoric age which, to him, as we have seen, was nothing more nor less than the age of the Family. How, then, was the next stage of human progress—the passage from the Family to the civil Community—brought about ? and what were the marks which distinguished it from what Vico regarded as the state of nature ? On the former question we are left entirely to conjecture ; and it is hardly worth while to follow Vico through the maze. One thing is clear : that, as their size increased, the monastic Families must have been thrown more and more into occasions both of intercourse and of collision ; and that either of these causes may readily have prompted them first to make fleeting alliance with each other, and then finally to join in some kind of lasting and organic union—the germ of the civil community, or the State. Such an union between already organized bodies, like the Families of Vico’s state of nature, is manifestly a thing very different from the individualist hypothesis of an union between previously isolated individuals ; and it is free from nearly all the objections to which that individualist hypothesis is exposed. For the members of a Family, especially of a Family so Spartan as Vico pictured, have already gone through a long discipline of joint action and mutual forbearance ; they have already, as Hume

¹ *Odyssey*, xi., 489-491 (Pope’s Translation).

was acute enough to see, had their "rough corners and untoward affections largely rubbed off" in the process.¹

With the second question, we stand on firmer ground. The effects, though not the causes, of the change to Civil Society are writ large upon the whole subsequent history of mankind. They are matters not of conjecture, but of every day experience and of history. It is enough if we pause for a moment upon two of them. The first of these explains itself: it is simply that involved in the change from the narrower to the wider unit; from the community of blood-kinship to the community based upon similarity of religious and moral traditions, upon similarity—which does not exclude occasional, and more than occasional clashing—of interests, upon the pride men take in common memories and the maintenance of common ideals. So much for the spirit of the new creation. As for its outward form, we need say no more than that it carries with it, and necessarily carries with it, a change from monarchy to aristocracy. The head of each Family, hitherto king within his own petty realm, now takes his place on equal terms with the heads of all the other Families, in the government of the wider community, the State. On this point—and he was the first to insist upon it—Vico is positive. The assumption that Monarchy was the earliest form of civil government is, in his eyes, a pure delusion. The *Iliad* alone is enough to prove that the form prevailing in primitive Greece was Aristocracy. And the same is true of primitive Rome. Even when under titular kings, Rome, like Poland in later times, was a manifest Aristocracy. The King was no more than an elected Doge; the substance of power was in the hands of an hereditary caste of nobles: in other words, of an Aristocracy.

Thus we are back at the point from which we started: at the historical State, as revealed by the earliest records. A State composed of still largely independent Families; a State further composed of two distinct, not to say hostile, Orders or races: one dominant, the other subject. The "rights" of such a community, as the early history of Rome remains to prove, are the rights of the governing caste, the aristocracy, the Patricians; the subject caste, the Plebeians, have no rights at all. And the subsequent history of the community is one

¹ *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III., Part II., § 2 (Vol. II., p. 260 of Green's Edition).

long struggle between the two Orders : a struggle in which the ruling caste is compelled to strip itself, one by one, of its exclusive privileges, to admit the Plebeians to one after another of the rights which, in the beginning, it had kept jealously to itself : a sacred heritage which, in the name alike of religion and morality, it was bound to guard against profanation by the "swinish multitude". Thus rights, which in their origin had been the exclusive privilege of the few, are, after ages of conflict, extended to the community at large : not, however, until the idea of Right, of moral and religious obligation, on which such rights are founded, has been previously accepted by the many, as well as by the chosen few ; not until the subjects have qualified themselves for enjoying the rights of their masters by previously embracing their code of Right.

Henceforth, the rights of birth, of race, of caste are swept away. Their place is taken by those of talent, of knowledge and of virtue : the only rights which can justify themselves to reason ; the only rights which confer a claim to a share in the government of any well-ordered, of any reasonable, State. And if it be asked what outward machinery is best adapted for securing their due influence to such qualities, then Vico, a born conservative, is at once ready with his answer : the establishment of a property qualification, as in the palmy days of the Roman Republic. For that is the only means of confining political power to the leisured classes ; and it is in the leisured classes alone that, with due allowance for exceptions, these indispensable qualities are to be found. In this, as in all else, Rome is the type and pattern of the well-ordered State.¹

That, in Vico's view, is the third and last revolution which marks the upward movement of human progress. All the changes that follow are but successive steps in the inevitable process of decay. The common people, having once obtained their rights, soon begin to abuse them ; the property qualification is swept away ; equality leads to licence ; and monarchy—perhaps despotism—is invoked as the only barrier against anarchy. Monarchy, in its turn, leads to luxury and effeminacy ; and that leaves the degenerate weaklings an easy prey to invaders more manly, more sober, more God-fearing than themselves. The ancient civilization is overthrown—overthrown by its own weak-

¹ *Scienza Nuova* (Second Version), p. 568.

ness, rather than by the strength of the conqueror ; and chaos comes again :—

So she whom mighty nations curtsied to,
Like a forlorn and desperate castaway,
Does shameful execution on herself.

So it has been from the beginning. So it will be to the end. Founded on religion and virtue in its first crude beginnings, the community must continue to base itself on religion and virtue, or it will miserably perish. That is the inexorable law of History. That, and not the unmeaning clash of interests, is the eternal lesson which History—which Philosophy interpreting the facts of History—relentlessly drives home.

II. This must serve for a sketch of Vico's work as political philosopher. With his work in other fields we can deal more briefly. And first, for his work in Comparative Mythology and all kindred studies. A good deal of what might be said on this subject has been virtually anticipated in my account of his political philosophy ; and from his handling of Greek and Roman History you will be able to see how original was his treatment of such matters : what I meant when I said that he must be regarded as the founder of Comparative Mythology and Anthropology ; that the *Scienza Nuova* is the fountain-head to which Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* and a hundred other works, down to *The Golden Bough*, ultimately go back. A few words only need be added as to the methods which he followed and the sources from which he drew.

The method he follows here offers a curious, but very instructive, contrast to that which he adopted in Political Philosophy. In Political Philosophy—so far, that is, as he is concerned with the question of origins—his method is rigorously deductive. Starting from the undoubted facts of the earliest recorded era—facts, however, which he was the first to interpret correctly—he reasons back to the facts which they compel us to presuppose in the prehistoric era. In Comparative Mythology his method is necessarily entirely different. Here it is mainly a matter of interpreting facts. Here, therefore, induction and deduction are inseparably blended, fused in a kind of intuition, which but too readily passes into pure divination. This method, with its attendant dangers, seems to be inherent in the study. For good or for evil, they both reappear in all the capital works written on the

subject ; and Vico, as pioneer, is perhaps more exposed to the dangers than the best of his successors. In particular, he may be thought to fall too willing a slave to the idols of the lecture-room : to press everything too eagerly into the service of his own favourite studies. Yet even here, in the light of subsequent caprices, his errors are instructive. If he is apt to torture all myths into a political meaning, his successors are equally ready to clip and pare them into allegories of natural history. King Arthur has been made a solar myth ; Samson has been made a solar myth ; I know not what man or thing has not been made a solar myth. Under these circumstances, each may serve as a useful corrective to the other. Neither makes allowance enough for what Grote, with a touch of pedantry, calls the "mythopœic faculty" : the pure delight in telling a story for the story's sake. Both—each in the interest of his own pet study—expose themselves to the retort of Sganarelle : "Vous êtes orfèvre, M. Josse."

As a sample of Vico's method, both at its best and its most risky, I quote his interpretation of the myth of Cadmus and the dragon's teeth. The slaying of the serpent symbolizes the clearing of the "vast forest of the earth," the feat so often attributed to Hercules. The teeth of the monster, sown in the virgin soil, stand for the teeth of the plough with which the land was broken up. The stones cast by the hero typify the hardened clods which his serfs would fain have seized and ploughed for their own behoof. The armed men who sprang from the furrows are the heroes, or nobles, who band together to defend their own against the robbers ; fighting not, as the legend vainly declares, against each other, but against their revolted serfs. The furrows are the "orders," the disciplined ranks of the nobles, the foundation on which the whole fabric of aristocratic, or feudal, authority was based. Finally, the serpent into which Cadmus was transformed is an image—the recognized image in primitive ages, as it still is in China and Japan—of that rightful authority, whose outward sign is the ownership of the soil : *Cadmus fundus factus est*, as the Latin phrase, in the most archaic form of the language, must assuredly have run. Thus "the whole legend is seen to embalm within it many ages of poetic history" : to be an imaginative summary of a contest, the most fateful of all contests, which, in truth of literal fact, lasted for generation after generation. Was there ever anything so ingenious ? Was there ever anything that suggested more formidable doubts ?

How other votaries of the Great Dragon may regard this interpretation, I tremble to think. Perhaps he and they may be left to settle the quarrel between them.

To ask from what source Vico drew in this field of his inquiry is to raise several curious questions. On the travellers of the sixteenth and seventeenth, though not (I think) of the eighteenth centuries, he makes occasional drafts : yet, perhaps from his apparent ignorance of any modern language beyond his own and Spanish, not so many as was to be expected or desired ; and his reference to such sources are, it must be confessed, commonly of an obvious nature. To the popular customs of his own country he is more heavily indebted : he notes, for instance, as Boccaccio had done before him, the Neapolitan and Florentine practice of throwing incense on the fire on Christmas Eve, and connects it with the peculiar sacredness attached by the Romans to fire and water. This was to open a wholly new—as Grimm and others were to show, a marvellously rich—vein of inquiry. In the main, however, he confines himself to the mythology of Greece and Rome : setting himself to prove, and proving, how great is the light which they throw on each other ; or rather, how great is the light which Greek mythology throws upon the political history, the primitive political conditions, both of its own country and of Rome.

There is one source of material—available, indeed, not so much for Comparative Mythology as for the kindred subjects of Comparative History and Anthropology—which he pointedly neglects. This is the primitive records of the Jewish race, as embodied in the early Books of the Old Testament. Of all storehouses of primitive history and primitive custom this is the richest. Why, then, did Vico not put it to better use ? The answer is simple : piety forbade. In the name of the Church—he was of the strictest sect of the orthodox—he steadily refused to make use of his opportunities—the few illustrations I have given from this source, for the sake of clearness, have in fact been supplied mainly by myself—steadily insisted that, between Jew and Gentile, between a supernatural and a purely natural development, there cannot, from the nature of the case, be any common measure. Yet, obdurate as he was, there are moments when, in spite of Pope and Cardinal, he cannot refrain from breaking into the forbidden preserve : just enough to show what he might have done, had his lot been cast in kindlier circumstances ; but unfortunately, no more. We

must be grateful for these occasional lapses, and only regret that his vigilance did not allow them to be more frequent.

III. Vico has also been hailed as the founder of what is called the Philosophy of History. What is the meaning to be attached to this term? Is there any sense in which it can be said to represent an ideal within the reach of human limitations? It is a question which has been hotly debated; and being neither historian nor philosopher, I approach it with great uneasiness.

There are, I suppose, three senses which may conceivably be given to the term. The Philosophy of History may be regarded as a study which enables us to foresee the future: the "Science of History," as it used gaily to be called some fifty years ago. Or it may be regarded as the study which offers a reasoned explanation of the past: a theory consistent at once with itself and with the dominant facts ascertained from the authentic records of the past. That is the sense in which the term is perhaps most commonly understood: the sense which it bore to Hegel and his contemporaries and which is elaborately worked out by Hegel himself in his *Philosophy of History*. Or lastly—coming down to a much humbler, a much more modest, conception—it may be taken to mean no more than the sum of conclusions which competent inquirers have drawn from the facts of History: generalizations, more or less wide, which they have built—each of them with regard to his own special field of study—upon the records of History. It is manifest that this is a far more limited conception than the other two: so limited that the champion of those more ambitious conceptions would doubtless repudiate its claim to be called a Philosophy of History at all.

What are we to say of each of these rival conceptions? The first, the "Science of History," must, I think, be rejected without ceremony. To suppose that it is, or can ever become, possible to predict the great revolutions of human affairs is to misunderstand the whole character of History, to misinterpret the whole nature of organic growth, which is the essence of man's History. An astronomer can predict the return of a comet with absolute precision. But a biologist cannot predict the next stage in the development of animal life; nor can a historian or philosopher predict the next stage in the progress of humanity. History never repeats itself; and to suppose that it does so is the wildest of delusions.

For the second conception, that elaborated by Hegel, there is much more to be said. But it has to meet two formidable objections. Given the large element of accident, of personal caprice, which belongs to human action and human character, is it possible to reduce the whole course of human history to the rigid laws of philosophical necessity? And given the limitations of human frailty, is it conceivable that any one man should combine in himself on the one hand that living knowledge of all the material facts and conditions, and on the other hand that speculative genius, both of which are indispensable to the Hegelian ideal?

The third conception, that which limits itself to generalizations closely drawn from the facts, is more modest and therefore less open to objection. It is indeed the conception tacitly adopted, the method actually pursued, by every historian who aspires to be more than a mere chronicler of events. He selects his facts, he draws conclusions from his facts, he generalizes, more or less widely, from his facts. Doubtless, the standard of fidelity in these matters is much higher now than it was a hundred, or even fifty, years ago; and that means that we now demand both greater accuracy in ascertaining the facts and greater strictness in generalizing, in drawing conclusions, from the facts than was at all common in the past. This has been one of the great achievements of historical scholarship in our own day: this, and the zeal with which historical scholars have thrown themselves into the task of exploring and sifting the vast mass of material which had too long been allowed to moulder in the Record Office and other public and private archives. The first result of this immense labour, and very properly, has been to make men more distrustful of such reconstructions as Hegel attempted now a century ago. But, as time goes on, it is possible, and even likely, that the more cautious generalizations obtained by the new methods will be found to have more points of contact than may have appeared in the first instance. It is even possible that we may at last arrive at the scattered limbs—I cannot think it will ever be more than the scattered limbs—of the vision which hovered before the mind of Vico: of “that ideal and eternal history which runs its course in time”. That is for time to show.

The memorable phrase I have just quoted is of itself enough to tell us where Vico stood in this matter. The truth is that all three conceptions of the Philosophy of History—but above all, the second, the

Hegelian, version of it—are reflected in his book. His general theory of the course of History may be described as a blend of the first two forms of the conception. It unites the conviction that the long roll of events from the beginning to “the last syllable of recorded time” forms one providential, and therefore intelligible, whole with the conviction that the past is the faithful mirror also of the future, and therefore that the future may be foreseen from the past. And if we ask how this may be, his answer is very simple. It is that, at certain intervals, the continuity of the world’s progress is violently broken; that the order established at such cost is hurled back into chaos; and that the new order, as it rises slowly out of chaos, faithfully reproduces all the stages—the monastic Family, the aristocratic State which grows out of it, the Democracy of virtue, the Democracy of licence, the Monarchy of restraint, the Monarchy of luxury and, finally, the general dissolution—which had marked first the growth, then the slow decline and fall, of the old order. Such a breach of continuity took place at the fall of the Roman Empire and the coming of the barbarians. It will take place again, at intervals more or less regular, so long as man remains upon the earth. The recurrence of such periods Vico describes as the “ebb and flow,” the *corso e ricorso*, of human history. And we see at a glance that it is nothing more nor less than Aristotle’s theory of cataclysms furbished up again, under a thin disguise, for the occasion. The only difference is that, to Aristotle, the cataclysm is a physical disaster, the deluge of a wide-spread tradition; to Vico, on the contrary, it is a moral catastrophe, brought about by human agency, by the gradual corruption to which all things human are providentially foredoomed.

It would be idle to criticize this theory in detail: its weaknesses are too obvious. I will content myself with two general remarks. The conclusion fails, because it is built on premisses far too narrow: upon nothing, in fact, but the circumstances attending the fall of the Roman Empire; as indeed, from beginning to end of his inquiry, the whole world is forced into the mould which Roman History had put into his hands. It is not the first, nor the last, time that the dead hand of Rome has been invoked to stifle the living growth of the present. On the other hand, it would be unjust to deny that Vico’s theory, feeble though it is in general outline, is full of fruitful suggestions in detail. As we have seen, he throws a flood of light upon

the early history both of Rome and Greece : his, in fact, was the first rational word spoken on the subject. And no one can read the *Scienza Nuova* without feeling that his interest in ideas had at least as much to do with this as his interest in facts. In his mind, the two things were inseparable.

IV. We come now to the last achievement of Vico : his work as herald of the great revolution which, years after his death, swept over European poetry.

Vico's theory of Poetry is coloured throughout by his general outlook upon life : if we choose to say so, by his philosophy of life. And just as his political speculations were largely determined by opposition to Locke and Spinoza, so his view of life and poetry was, in great measure, the outcome of hostility to Descartes. It has often been said—and I think, with justice—that the abstract nature of the Cartesian Philosophy was greatly responsible for the abstractions, the consequent bloodlessness and nervelessness, of European poetry in the age of Boileau and of Pope. It is precisely this characteristic of Descartes' system, and of the poetry which went hand in hand with it, that roused the wrath of Vico : this, and the craving for distinctness, for sharply defined analysis, for clear-cut precision, which was closely bound up with it.

On the side of Philosophy, Vico argues as follows. It is misleading to say that the distinctness of ideas is the surest evidence of their truth. On the contrary, it is the surest sign of their incompleteness, or even of their falseness. In the more abstract fields of knowledge—in mathematics and physics, for instance, such distinctness may be a useful test enough. But in all other fields of experience—above all, in those relating to the moral, political, imaginative and religious life of man—it is a pure delusion : “it is the vice, rather than the virtue of man's reason”. It is to be attained only by forcing within finite limits what is illimitable and infinite. The ideas so arrived at may be distinct; but, for that very reason, they are radically false. “When I suffer, for instance, I cannot recognize any form in my sufferings, nor set any limit to them. My perception of them is infinite and, because infinite, is proof of the greatness of man's nature. It is a vivid perception, and bright beyond all others : so bright indeed that, like the sun, it can be observed only through darkened glasses.”¹

¹ *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia* (1710) : Opere di Vico, II., p. 85.

Were these words written at the beginning of the eighteenth century, or the beginning of the nineteenth? Are they from the hand of Vico? or from Carlyle, or one of the German romanticists, philosophers or otherwise, by whom Carlyle was so largely inspired? If we did not know to the contrary, we should probably say the latter. Curiously enough, there is a poem of Wordsworth's in which you will find precisely the same illustration, used to enforce precisely the same truth:—

Action is transitory, a step, a blow,
A motion of the muscles, this way or that :
—'Tis done ; and in the after solitude
We wonder at ourselves, like men betrayed.
Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,
And shares the nature of infinity.¹

On the side of Poetry, the revolt of Vico has perhaps a yet deeper significance. What enraged him, as two generations later it was to enrage Alfieri, was the prosiness and the bloodlessness, the effeminacy and the nervelessness which afflicted the poetry composed under the legislation of Parnassus. What he pined for was the "immersion in the senses and passions," the flesh and blood, the vividness, the speaking imagery which springs unsought and unbidden from the inmost heart of the poet, the "ferocity" (to use Alfieri's word) which he found in Dante, in the poetic myths and legends of primitive Greece : above all, in Homer. It was Achilles hurling defiance at Apollo. It was Achilles melted to pity as he listened to Priam suing for the body of Hector and, in the very moment of relenting, blazing out once more into ungovernable fury at the first word that displeased him. It was Ulysses biding his time under wrongs and insults and, when his hour was come, leaping upon the threshold, stripping off his rags, and aiming the bitter arrow of vengeance at the heart of the wrong-doers and the scoffers. It was Ugolino, gnawing the head of his murderer in the frozen pool. Could he but have known them, it would have been Gunnar and Hogni harping, to scorn their conqueror, in the pit of serpents. It would have been Lear maddened, heart-broken, helpless, yet "every inch a king". It would have been Othello casting himself upon the bed beside his murdered wife, that his last breath might fall upon her lips. It would have been Gastibelza crazed by

¹ *The Borderers*, Act III.

the mountain-wind, crazed yet more hopelessly by the sting of a woman's treachery. It would have been Gilliatt wrestling alone against wind and wave and the monsters of the deep. It would have been Cimourdain, livid as ashes, passing sentence upon Gauvain.

It was this passion for the great things of poetry that led Vico to the critical study of Homer : to those theories about the authorship of the Homeric poems which are often wrongly supposed to have originated with Wolf (1795). He was early led to the conclusion—a very sound one, I suppose—that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* could not possibly be by the same author : the difference between the social conditions painted in the two poems is too great, the geographical and other discrepancies are too serious, to allow of any other conclusion.¹ In his later years he was led much further : led, as I cannot but think, on to much more questionable ground.² He came to think, as Grimm and others have thought since, that neither poem can be assigned to any one author ; that each is the creation not of a single poet, but of the whole race. That in both poems—particularly in the *Iliad*—there are interpolations, amounting in some cases to long episodes, I suppose no one would now dream of denying. But the doctrine of spontaneous generation is surely calculated to stagger even the stoutest faith. Neither the character of Achilles, which runs like a thread of gold through the whole texture of the *Iliad*, one of the greatest imaginative achievements of all time, nor the vengeance of Ulysses which fills exactly one half of the whole *Odyssey*, can well have taken shape except in one supremely gifted mind. To suppose otherwise is to go against all probability : to go against all that we know of the working of poetic inspiration.

But after all, the importance of such critical questions may easily be overrated. The real "Homeric question" is not a question of authorship, nor of social conditions, nor of geography, but a question of poetic appreciation : the one essential thing is that we should open our minds to the supreme imaginative power of these two magical creations. And, with all his critical instincts, Vico was the last man in the world to question the truth of this assertion : the last man in the world to allow his antiquarian interests to get the better of his sense

¹ So far he went in his Latin Treatise, *Jus universum*, of 1720.

² See Book V. of the Second Version of *La Scienza Nuova* (1730-1744) : *Il vero Omero*.

of poetry. It is because he never sacrificed the more to the less important in these matters that I have claimed—and I am convinced, justly claimed—for him the distinction of having been the first to herald the great poetic revival of the eighteenth century : the first to demand that Poetry should be released from the gilded cage in which Pope and Boileau had imprisoned her : that she should be restored to the freedom of her native earth and heaven. In this sense, he was the herald of Goethe in Germany ; of Victor Hugo in France ; and in our own country of a whole “ nest of singing birds ” : of Wordsworth and Coleridge, of Keats and Shelley, of Byron and Walter Scott. Add this to his other services, and you will admit that he was the very prince of pioneers.

“ He wrote in the eighteenth century,” as Michelet says, “ but he wrote for the nineteenth.” Yes ; and we may add—for the world has not yet done with him—he wrote for the twentieth century also.