



THE ORIGINS OF CULTURAL HISTORY

2 'Geisteswissenschaft' and the Natural Sciences *Vico versus Descartes*

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THE ORIGINS OF CULTURAL HISTORY

2 'Geisteswissenschaft' and the Natural Sciences

Vico versus Descartes

This is a lightly edited transcript of a tape-recording of the second of three Gauss Seminars given by Berlin at Princeton on 19–22 February 1973. No attempt has been made to bring it to a fully publishable form, but this version is posted here for the convenience of scholars.

I HAVE briefly introduced Herder's attitude to three problems in particular, namely the notion of belonging, the whole question of the unity of man, and the notion of commitment, which is very, very strong in Herder – and therefore his general conception of cultures. On the notion of belonging he was, I suppose, the first European thinker to enunciate fully what it is that he meant by saying that man was social. The proposition that man is by nature social is an ancient truth or platitude which certainly goes back to Aristotle. It is uttered by Aristotle, it is uttered by St Thomas, it is to be found in the works of many Renaissance thinkers, in Hobbes, in Locke, in almost every thinker who has ever spoken about society. But Herder gave it a particularly rich and concrete content which made the other statements about it seem somewhat thin and formula-like. For Herder the notion of belonging consisted in the fact that the craving to belong to an association was just as basic a human desire as the desire for eating, drinking, procreation, or any other fundamental human need. He believed that every human being possessed this desire, and that to take it away from a man dehumanised him and deprived him. He passionately protested against the notion that society had to be conceived of as formed by almost a species of mutual agreement between men originally isolated. Even as a heuristic device this appeared to him to be a distortion of the facts. We find men initially and basically already in society, and the links which unite human beings are intrinsic to them, and the particular link which unites them, of course, for him is not blood, not soil, but language.

Let me quote what Herder says about language to show the particular fashion in which he puts it, which I think is somewhat different from the way in which anyone else had ever put it. 'Has a nation anything more precious than the language of its fathers? In it

dwelt its entire world of tradition, history, religion, principles of existence; its whole heart and soul.¹ 'In the works of the imagination and feeling, in the works which are expressed by a nation's language and words, the entire soul of a nation reveals itself most clearly.'²

This is a doctrine which afterwards people like Sismondi and Michelet and Mazzini developed into an entire theory of nationalism, but in Herder it is not a nationalistic theory yet. The theory is simply that if you wish to understand human beings you must understand the movements of their soul. The movements of their soul can be understood only in terms of the particular symbolism which they use for the purpose of expressing what they have to say. For him language and what is expressed are identical. It is not the case that we have thoughts and feelings which are non-symbolic in character. When we think, we think in symbols. The notion that thought is an independent entity which looks for symbols to clothe it, in the sense in which a hand might look for a glove, is to him a total falsehood. We think in symbols, and these symbols are not translatable. There is a famous statement by Brunetti, made at the beginning of the fifteenth century, who says: Anything which is said in Greek can be equally well said in Latin.³ This to Herder appeared to be a total falsification of experience. Every sentiment had its natural mode of expression. Any attempt to translate one language into another meant the transposition of one form of human experience into another. Something inevitably was lost in the translation not merely of poetry but of prose, provided

¹ *Herders sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan and others (Berlin, 1877–1913) xvii 58; cf. TCE2 234. [Roger Hausheer translates: 'Does then a people, especially an uncultivated people, have anything more dear to it than the language of its fathers? In it dwell its entire mental riches of tradition, history, religion, and principles of life, all its heart and soul.']

² *ibid.* xviii 58; cf. TCE2 255. [Roger Hausheer translates: 'In the works of poetry, i.e. of imagination and feeling, it [a high and fine philosophy] is practised to most certain effect, because in these the entire soul of the nation manifests itself most freely.' So IB's version is really more of a paraphrase than a translation. (In the sentences immediately preceding this passage Herder says that it is a fine thing to try to capture the essence, the national genius, of a people in all its infinitely ramified idiosyncrasies – 'dies ist eine hohe und feine Philosophie' – 'this is a high and fine philosophy'; and this activity is most fruitfully carried out in the case of works of imaginative literature.)]

³ '[...] nihil Graece dictum est, quod Latine dici non possit'. 'De interpretatione recta' (c.1420): *Leonardi Bruni Aretino humanistisch-philosophische Schriften*, ed. Hans Baron (Leipzig and Berlin, 1928), 95; cf. TCE2 203.

this poetry or prose really was a genuine expression of a human personality, and not simply a formal expression in a pre-arranged symbolism of some scientific or technical truth.

The difficulty about understanding history, or understanding society, for him, was the difficulty of understanding the use of symbols by persons who were brought up in a society different from our own. Let me quote a passage on this:

How unspeakably difficult it is to convey the particular quality of an individual human being, and how impossible it is to say precisely what distinguishes an individual, his way of feeling and living. How different and how individual [*anders und eigen*] everything becomes once his eyes see it, once his soul grasps, his heart feels it. How much depth there is in the character of a single people which no matter how often observed and gazed at with curiosity and wonder nevertheless escapes the word which attempts to capture it, and even when the word to catch it is seldom so recognisable as to be universally understood and felt. If this is so, what happens when one tries to master an entire ocean of peoples, an entire ocean of times, cultures, countries with one glance, one sentiment, by means of one single word. Words' pale shadow-play, an entire living picture of ways of life or habits, of wants, of characteristics of land and sky must be added or provided for in advance. One must start by feeling sympathy with a nation if one is to feel a single one of its inclinations or acts or all of them together.⁴

In other words, for him nations and individuals are analogous. Both are what later became called organic entities, although he is very careful not to use this particular metaphor in any sense in which it could be said to be abused. The literal sense of national spirit, or a nation as some kind of super-individual, or super-individual entity, which in some ways determines the behaviour of its constituents – the sense of a nation which is there whether or not any given member of it exists or not – that metaphysical sense is absent from Herder. He remains rigidly and uncompromisingly empirical in that regard. But the heart of the doctrine is that, in order to understand, you must understand the play of symbolism on the part of a voice speaking, and this is as true of cultures as it is of individuals; and, as I say, for Herder every culture possesses its own shape, its own quality, its own tone, its own particular structure, and they are all

⁴ op. cit. (2 above) v 502; cf. TCE2 263.

pleasing to him. There is no *Favoritvolk* – there is no favourite nation – there is no hint of any particular nationalism in Herder, and above all, of course, he hates the State. He hates anything at all which appears to him to cramp individuality, to cramp the cultural expression of a group of human beings, anything which in any way is an obstacle to the creative process. He delights in trying to convey the individual quality of Greeks, Phoenicians, Persians, Georgians, Aztec Indians, East Indians, Danes, Jews, Portuguese – anyone who comes under his gaze. Whether he does it correctly or incorrectly does not matter very much. The amount of information at his disposal in the second third of the eighteenth century was not enormous, and therefore he makes at least as many mistakes about the actual nations which he describes as, for example, his predecessor Montesquieu; but unlike Montesquieu he takes a peculiar delight in trying to express the individuality of each of these cultures, without, in particular, even comparing them; he simply congratulates them for being what they are and believes quite sincerely that in this great garden of flowers there is absolutely no need for conflict between any of them, that they can all grow together perfectly peacefully and each enrich the general human civilisation of which they are members.

This central doctrine is of course expressed when he says that every culture has its own *Schwerpunkt*, its own centre of gravity, and every people has its own particular goal, its own particular form of happiness, and that these cannot be compared. Because he says this, certain conclusions follow which were certainly unusual for his time and age, and certainly contradicted the entire ideal of the Enlightenment: namely that, if it is really true that every culture seeks to realise itself in its own peculiar direction, and is entitled so to do, being what it is, then to ask for any kind of general standards of value between them, for any kind of criterion in terms of which their excellences can be compared, becomes intrinsically and logically absurd. How can one ask whether, for example, Greek sculpture is or is not superior to, let us say, Indian sculpture? How can one ask whether Roman law is or is not superior to the law of some other nation? Each of them expresses the peculiar individuality of the particular culture to which it belongs, and they are all incommensurable. He flatly lays down the proposition that the happiness of one people cannot be compared with the happiness

of another; that there is no way of comparing the excellence of one culture with the excellence of the other.

If you are going to take up the general point of view of the French Enlightenment, particularly in the eighteenth century, whereby undoubtedly some kind of progress can be recorded, so that men start in a condition of barbarism and gradually move through seas of superstition and darkness towards a gradual realisation of the truth, of knowledge, of the organisation of their life under sane and rational principles, the destruction of barbarism, the triumph of reason and good sense – if you believe that, then presumably there must be some kind of criterion in terms of which these things can be measured. This is to Herder an arrant heresy, and he denies it, and for that reason you first get in him the notion of the incommensurability of the values of different cultures; and if these are incommensurable, then presumably there is no single condition of which you can say: This is the perfect human condition, if only man could arrive at it. This of course does flatly contradict the fundamental and central ideal of the Enlightenment, according to which, even if we cannot reach it, it must at any rate in principle be possible to formulate a kind of existence in which all human virtues reach perfection, and all these virtues harmonise with each other, on the simple principle that, since to all questions there must be one true answer and one true answer only, and since no true proposition can be incompatible with – or certainly cannot contradict – any other true proposition, the accumulation of situations described by all these true propositions must in fact constitute human perfection. This is a proposition which, if Herder is right, is a logical incoherence, cannot be true, and to this extent what he says is not compatible or reconcilable with the central ideal of the Enlightenment; and although Herder believed in science, although he accepted a great deal, certainly, of what French scientists had done in this sphere, although he regards with great benevolence and toleration all kinds of doctrines from all kinds of quarters, nevertheless this particular difference remains, this gulf remains between them, and of course profoundly affected future notions of what a culture is. That is to say, he was the first person who was really responsible for the notion of the co-existence or the simultaneous existence of a number of forms of life, each of which had to be judged in its own internal terms, which could not be compared, and which were misrepresented if judged by criteria

drawn from some other culture, not drawn from within that culture itself. For that, I think – or at least for popularising this idea – Herder is certainly ultimately responsible.

The centre of this doctrine, of course, is: You must be yourself. Do not live on others. Herder's perpetual doctrine is: Do not be a parasite even upon your own past. Because you are a German, do not worship the memory of Arminius, do not try to be like Siegfried, do not try to revive the marvellous heroism of the ancient Cerusans, which a certain number of nationalistic Germans are already beginning to trumpet about in his own day. Arminius is dead. Do not emulate what Plato and Aristotle thought: Plato and Aristotle were Greeks. They are marvellous thinkers; what they say is well worth remembering and indeed celebrating, but they lived in the Mediterranean a great many years ago; you are Germans living in a northern climate. Aristotle is theirs, Leibniz is yours. Follow your own particular doctrines: every nation must seek to realise those ideals which nature and mind, acting in combination, have produced for it. Therefore there is this perpetual sermon: Be yourself – do not lean upon others.

This is in direct contradiction, for example, to his contemporary Winckelmann, who was also trying to escape from some kind of narrow German provincialism in the 1760s, and drew this famous ideal of Greek culture – simple, noble, sublime – towards which he tried to draw the attention of his German contemporaries. For Herder this was simply a piece of escapism of a completely, not only unpracticable, but rather unworthy kind, something which could not possibly yield genuine fruit. We must be of our time – *soyons de notre temps*, he said – and in this respect he in a sense imitated the Enlightenment itself. It was all very well for people to talk about Franks, to talk about Tacitus, to talk about the glories of the past; we must try to revive the glories of the present. You must do what you can, he said, be as creative and as original and as sincere as you can, and let others judge whether you belong to your national tradition. Do not emulate the classics: if you yourselves create with a sufficient degree of imagination and force, let others judge whether you are classical or not.

That is Herder's essential sermon, and in that respect, curiously enough, he stands on the same side as Voltaire, rather surprisingly, against the people who constantly bring up the traditions of the past in order to justify certain acts in the present. You will find in the

eighteenth century, for example, that, as part of the general political struggle of the times, thinkers like Montesquieu and Boulainvilliers, and even Mably to a certain extent, took this line: Mably pointed out that the French were Gallo-Romans, Boulainvilliers and Montesquieu that they were conquering Franks; in order to prop up the claims of the French aristocracy against what they regarded as the usurping claims of the centralising monarchy, they tried to revive the claims of the ancient Frankish conquerors, and they offered privileges which these persons were granted when they conquered France as justification of certain powers and privileges on the part of the French nobility. Against these people Voltaire, with considerable wit, produced those famous mocking lines. He says that to claim certain rights for the aristocracy simply because some ancient Franks did or did not conquer France, and that we must simply go back to these Franks, is rather as if you were to say to the sea: You were originally at Fréjus, you were originally at Ferrara, you were originally at Ravenna; you left these places; go back there immediately!

This sentiment is precisely what Herder employs in adjuring his fellow Germans, when he says: Never mind about the privileges of the past, never mind about the dark Teuton woods, never mind about the fact that liberties are supposed to have come out of these dark woods and fructified decadent Europe during the ages of dark barbarian rebellions, this is all over. Today we must revive the German genius by simply not imitating in a pale manner ideals not our own. It is better to be a German, an ordinary, normal Saxon or Prussian or Westphalian, than a fourth-rate Frenchman, which is what most Germans are at the moment seeking to be. That was the general content of any degree of nationalism or patriotism which Herder's sermons contain.

If you ask where this comes from, this attitude of Herder's, the notion that cultures differ from each other, that their ideals are different, that assimilation is always a sign of disease, that nostalgia (so he says) is the worthiest of all pains, because people wish to be at home, it is very difficult to trace its roots. Perhaps it goes back to Thomasiaus and earlier German thinkers in the eighteenth century. But mainly it has to be recognised as being original to Herder himself. Herder's ideal for a human being is what Hegel afterwards defined liberty as being, *bei sich selbst sein*, to be at home. In order to be at home you must live within a community which takes you for

granted and which you take for granted, with which you can communicate. To be lonely is to say things and not to be understood. That is the essence of solitude, it is not to live by oneself. To live by oneself is quite easy, and very desirable, perhaps, in the case of contemplative thinkers, but to speak and not to be understood, that is to be in a condition of gloom and alienation and must at all costs be avoided. How is it to be avoided? Why, of course by living among people with whom you have some kind of natural kinship or affinity.

The heart of Herder's doctrine is roughly this: that as a result of the working of natural forces – perhaps nature and climate – but also as a result of the working of certain spiritual forces, which he enlarges upon, there are human communities, some large, some small; that there are certain impalpable connections between members living in the same community which unite them in a manner closer than that in which you are united with human beings living in other communities; that, for example, if you are a German, then the way in which you pass legislation, the way in which you write poetry, your handwriting, your manner of getting up and sitting down, your manner of eating, your manner of brushing your hair, your manner of writing hymns, your manner of dancing, your manner of ruling yourself, your large and your small acts, your small personal idiosyncrasies as well as your large collective policies and attitudes – all these things have something in common, have a certain internal resemblance, if you like, or at any rate kinship, affinity, which they do not possess in relation to similar acts on the part of the Portuguese. Of course Portuguese legislation resembles German legislation, and the way in which the Portuguese brush their hair may resemble the way in which the Germans brush their hair, but there is something about the brushing of German hair and the way in which the Germans pass their laws, and the particular form and rhythm of German ballads or hymns or dances, which is directly detectable as being German, so that as soon as a German comes into contact with it he might be said to feel at home, he might be said to have a certain feeling of kinship, in the sense in which Pushkin, for example, talking about the Russians, later said, 'There is Russia here; here it smells of the Russian spirit',⁵ in the way in which Frenchmen talked about 'la France éternelle', the way in

⁵ [Loose.] Prologue to *Ruslan and Ludmila*, line 41.

which Rupert Brooke talked about a corner of England in some far-away, forgotten foreign field – that sort of sense of a *Gestalt* quality which immediately conveys to you some sort of a flow, if you like, of feeling, embodied in a language, embodied in an accent, embodied in a peculiar way of speaking and thinking and feeling. That is what human beings cannot live without, without in some way being diminished thereby. This, I think, is what Herder put on the map. In other words, this is the analysis of what it means to belong, and although no doubt this is the feeling of most human beings in most places at most times in the history of the world, it was Herder who first defined it, or at any rate gave an analysis of it, and a description of it, which stuck. This, I think, is perhaps his major service so far as his actual contribution to human self-knowledge is concerned.

As I say, if you ask where this comes from, well of course the resistance to foreign influence in Germany is an older thing than Herder. Thomasius already began to lecture in German, Leibniz wrote texts in which he wishes the German language to flourish and be strong, and German thinkers not always to be forced to use Latin, as he himself, of course, only too frequently did, and so forth. This is there: you will find a certain amount of invocation to the German language as early as the sixteenth century and even before that. But it was really, I think, an original impulse on Herder's own part which put these things on the map.

The only thinker who really anticipated him, and said some of the things which Herder said, is I think his teacher Hamann, on whom I do not wish to enlarge, otherwise it will make this lecture too long. Let me quote some lines from Hamann and you will see a certain affinity between him and Herder's doctrines. 'Every court, every school, every profession, every closed corporation, every sect – each has its own vocabulary.'⁶ How, asks Hamann, does one enter these vocabularies? With the passion of 'a friend, an intimate, a lover',⁷ with faith, and not by rules – this was written in the late 1760s. As I said before, he thinks that God is a poet, not a geometer. Only spiders like Spinoza make systems which strut over the real

⁶ Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Joseph Nadler (Vienna, 1949–57) ii 172 line 21.

⁷ *ibid.* 171 line 15.

world, catch flies and build ‘castles in the air’.⁸ In Holbach’s world there is no colour, no passion, no joy, no imagination – it is a corpse. This is of course repeated in a very famous statement by Goethe, who says that when he read Holbach’s *Système de la nature* in 1773 at Strasburg, it struck him as ‘so grey, so Cimmerian, so corpse-like’ that he ‘shuddered at it as if it were a ghost’.⁹ It was no doubt Herder whose paeans to Strasburg Cathedral first awoke in Goethe a certain feeling for Gothic which perhaps he did not have before, even though, curiously enough, Herder disliked Gothic. But when he inspected Strasburg Cathedral he had to sing his hymn of praise to that too: everything which is, must be admired; everything which man has created is good; everything in which there is some kind of trace of a living creative feeling on the part of human beings must be given its fair play.

The only people whom Herder really detests are the conquerors and the assimilators. He hates Alexander the Great; he hates Julius Caesar; he hates Charlemagne – Alexander the Great because he crushed the Cappadocians and the Misians and the Persians and a lot of little peoples in Asia Minor. Who knows what they might have created if the terrible dead hand of the Macedonian phalanx had not descended upon them? Julius Caesar too crushed the spirit of the Gauls, and we do not know what Vercingetorix and his friends might have done if it had not been for those ghastly Roman legions tramping all over them. Charlemagne forcibly converted the Saxons (this comes from Möser): here were these gentlemanly figures, these Saxon gentlemen-farmers, full of spirit, full of creative ability, crushed and destroyed by an alien religion, Christianity. So Herder, although he was after all the chief clergyman of the Grand Duchy of Weimar, and it became him rather ill to say this, keeps complaining that unfortunately Christian missionaries have completely destroyed and perverted the feelings of rather a lot of Balts, that a lot of British missionaries have completely erased Hindu culture in favour of some kind of Christian tradition which is totally alien to all these peoples. Assimilation, uniformity, the destruction of original cultures, centralisation, all these are for him

⁸ Johann Georg Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Walther Ziesemer and Arthur Henkel (Wiesbaden and Frankfurt, 1955–), v 265 line 37.

⁹ *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, book 11: Goethe, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit*, ed. Siegfried Scheibe, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1970), 405.

forms of dehumanisation, degradation, the squeezing of human beings into Procrustean beds, the conversion of them into dead human material for bureaucrats to shape and form. That is the main cry which Herder planted among his followers towards the end of the eighteenth century. That is his position, and it goes directly athwart what might be called the centralising, uniformising, rationalising spirit of the proper French Enlightenment, which wished to destroy superstition and prejudice and nonsense by creating a sane, rational, universal rule of human beings as citizens of the world rather than as inhabitants of some peculiar local tradition. During the French Revolution – which after all was the attempt to express into reality this ideal of some kind of rational, sane, well-organised society – when Frenchmen described themselves as good patriots, in the conventional language of the early 1790s, they did not mean so much that they were good Frenchmen, what they meant was that they were proud to be citizens of a country which was the first country in the world to give it an example of a sane, rational, free society as against the hideous relics of the evil barbarity and irrationalism which reigned in the rest of the world. Between these two ideals it is extremely difficult to draw a bridge: that is the point I wish to make.

As I say, if you ask where all this comes from, well, perhaps to some extent it comes from the various romantic British sources which I tried to cite last time. Perhaps to some extent it comes from Adam Ferguson, whose essay on the history of civil society Herder certainly read, and who also took a certain amount of almost perverse pleasure in hammering home the view that men in general, as he found them, do not like leisure, do not like peace, do not like stability, what they like is strife, hatred, struggle, passion, love, violence; that when men are left peaceful for too long they get bored; that when men have order and stability for too long they become restive; that men actually indulge in sports which are full of danger *because* they are full of danger; that men admire enemies who cause terror in them far more than they admire the enemies who do not cause terror in them; that men actually seek terror; that men seek irregularity in life. You must remember that Ferguson was a chaplain at the Black Watch for a certain period of his life, and perhaps it was really life with these doughty Scotch warriors which produced in him this extraordinary taste for rather rough and rather violent forms of outdoor exercise, but anyhow it is extremely present in all

his writings. He keeps emphasising that there is nothing more dreary for human beings than to be quiet, peaceful, steady contemplators such as Hume or the Utilitarians wanted to make them; that this is the sort of thing which caused degeneracy in countries. The only thing which kept people alive was to forget themselves in some task about which they were passionately concerned. It did not matter what their goals were, but their goals were not tranquillity, their goals were not peaceful contemplation, their goals were not law and order, their goals were something which engaged their emotions, and this as often as not made them ferocious, made them stern, made them even violent, at times – war was not always bad, peace was not always good.

That is Ferguson's chief sermon. When in one of his essays Professor Laski describes him as being a kind of pinchbeck Montesquieu, that tells us rather more about the judgement of Professor Laski than it does, perhaps, about the actual contents of Ferguson's essay, which is totally unlike that of Montesquieu, as far as I can see, in every possible detail. We admire the Greeks, said Ferguson, but there was never a bloodier country than Greece, thanks to the strife of the Greek city-states with each other. Ancient Greece was 'agitated, beyond any spot on the globe, by domestic contentions and foreign wars'.¹⁰ It is their bloody wars which kept them in a state of constant competition with each other. It is this which stimulated their creative abilities. The idea that the ancient Greeks were peaceful, quiet contemplators of eternal values, such as Plato wished to make them, or persons engaged in pressing plants or collecting specimens, as Aristotle wished to make them, was a somewhat unhistorical view of the ancient Greeks, and Ferguson hammered away at this, and it may be perhaps that it is particularly his rather romantic vision of the past as being filled with barbarian games of a splendid kind, which was what made for progress and what made for temperament and what made for such human values as he admired, that to some extent inspired Herder. 'The artless song of the savage,' says Ferguson, 'the heroic legend of the bard, have sometimes a magnificent beauty, which no change of language can improve, and no refinements of the critic reform ... while we admire

¹⁰ *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), part 3, section 8: ed. Duncan Forbes (Edinburgh, 1966), 178.

the judgement and invention of Virgil, and of other later poets, these terms appear misapplied to Homer.¹¹ That is fairly typical.

So much for Herder. If you ask what his origins are, as I say, perhaps it goes back to the pietists, perhaps it goes back to someone like Zinzendorf, who said that emotion – passion – is the only thing which can conduct man to the true vision of a godhead: anyone who seeks to prove the existence of God by rational means is an atheist, he said.¹² This was quite a powerful statement to make in a country which, after all, more or less accepted certain forms of rational Christianity, but it does go back, perhaps, to a certain heart of irrationalism which lies in at any rate certain aspects of the Lutheran religion, and perhaps it is this in which Herder, to some extent, can be regarded as being rooted. At any rate, that is all that can be done for him: he must be regarded as one of the few relatively original thinkers in the history of man. After all, we cannot assume that everything which everyone says must always be derived from somebody else's idea or somebody else's thought. If it were the case that every idea must be anticipated by some other idea which is very similar to it, nobody would ever think of anything for the first time, and this is not perhaps a wholly tenable proposition.

Let me cross now from Herder to a thinker who resembles him in uncanny respects, but whose influence upon Herder is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to trace. The Italian thinker Giambattista Vico was born in Naples in 1668, and died there in 1744. The connection between Vico and Herder, as I say, is much speculated about, much written about; nobody can really prove any connection at all. Nobody knows what Herder read or did not read, but Herder's views were fully formed by 1774, and he read Vico, to the extent to which he read him at all, only about twenty years later, so that direct influence appears to be altogether excluded. There are people who point out that there is an Italian commentator called Cesarotti, who wrote about Ossian and Homer, and they think it possible that Herder may have read him, and in this way may have been indirectly influenced. Nobody can really tell who influences whom. The whole subject of influences and counter-influences is an extremely vague

¹¹ *ibid.* 173.

¹² *M. Aug. Gottlieb Spangenberg's Apologetische Schluß-Schrift ...* (Leipzig and Görlitz, 1752; photographically reprinted as Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, *Ergänzungsbände zu den Hauptschriften*, ed. Erich Beyreuther and Gerhard Meyer, vol. 3, Hildesheim 1964), 181.

one, and it is very difficult to pin anything down in this region. Therefore do not let me occupy any further time on that, and let me come instead to the thought of Vico, who forms a chapter, perhaps, normally regarded as the original chapter, in the idea of the history of culture. The fact that it is not the original chapter, as I think, will be the subject of my next and last lecture.

Vico is an altogether remarkable figure. There is a certain analogy between the Naples into which Vico was born and the condition of Germany at the time of Herder's early education in Königsberg and elsewhere. In 1690, rather as in the case of German universities in the mid-eighteenth century, there was a clash of two tendencies which came into direct collision. In Germany there was pietism, German tradition, the desire to protect themselves, particularly, as I say, at the edges of the German world – in East Prussia and in Switzerland – against the heavy hand of Gallicising reformers; just as there was a collision between old, traditional, rooted, perhaps rather rural values, on the one hand, and on the other hand the rational, economically minded reformers, inspired by empirical and rational scientific ideals, so in Italy in the 1690s, particularly in Naples, you have a collision between the dominant philosophy, which is Cartesian, and some more ancient, local, essentially medieval Catholic doctrine, in which the majority of the inhabitants of that very pious and very conformist kingdom, under the successive rule of the Spaniards and Austrians, was then educated. Of course Cartesianism was the dominant, fashionable philosophy of the seventeenth century, and quite naturally so; and one of the central tenets of Descartes amounted to propaganda against humane studies in contrast with the progressive mathematical and physical – scientific – studies.

Vico was the son of a bookseller, brought up by priests in the traditional disciplines of a pious Catholic youth in the city of Naples; that is to say, in the study of patristic texts, of medieval philosophical texts, and above all of the subject which preoccupied him all his life, namely Roman law. The fashionable philosophy, as I say, was directed somewhat against this. The attack really came from two quarters. First of all there was the Cartesian attack, which simply took the form of saying: All true knowledge is by nature cumulative. If you have discovered something and established its truth by means which can be regarded as scientific, that is to say, as susceptible to proof, and therefore as unsusceptible to refutation, or incapable of

refutation, at any rate, then what is proved is proved, and upon that basis you can build further knowledge. If we can establish certain mathematical or geometrical propositions, perhaps certain propositions in physics or in astronomy, as being true, there is no need for our successors to go over this again. We can stand on the shoulders of our predecessors and build from there. There is no need even to know what our predecessors have done: if they have done their work well, we accept it as being true. We can check their methods. Science simply consists in using methods which any rational person can teach to any other rational person, and which any third rational person can check for himself. There cannot be any concealment, there is nothing private, there is nothing mysterious, there is nothing privileged here. This is how true knowledge advances; this is how science advances.

But if we look at these humane studies, at things like classical scholarship or Roman law, or most of all history, what do we find? We find nothing but an absolute mess, a complete chaos. Where are the axioms? Where are the transformation rules which can be relied upon, which are logically guaranteed? Where are the conclusions which possess irrefutable certainty? None of these things are here. Of course, there is no reason why people should not engage in historical studies if they amuse them: it is exactly like travel. Or you can also learn Swiss or Bas-Breton, if it suits you. These are harmless pastimes, but cannot be regarded as objectives of a serious scientific life. Any man who wishes to add to knowledge is not going to pretend that travel or pottering about with early languages or with dialects or with patois can in any way be compared to the building up of a great body of knowledge of which every brick is tested, and of which every brick occupies a fixed position in relation to every other brick. Therefore, if you wish to waste your time upon these subjects, there is no reason why you should not, but there is absolutely no scientific structure here. Therefore it is not possible to create a body of knowledge upon which further knowledge can be built, and therefore no progress can be made. These subjects are unscientific by their nature, they are fundamentally – although Descartes refrained from saying so in so many words – nothing but amusements, they are just a collection of old wives' tales. They are just agreeable fancies, like poetry and so forth – not serious, not something which ought to occupy a serious man's life.

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This was very wounding to someone like Vico, who was deeply steeped in the culture of the past, and to whom all these things were very dear. He knew a good deal of Latin, he knew some Greek, he was brought up in a profoundly humane culture, in a kind of late Renaissance way, in Naples, and this was not at all the sort of thing he wished to hear. At the same time he saw no way of countering it, and in his early life he was certainly a devoted Cartesian.

There is another quarter from which the attack upon historians came, from an earlier quarter, namely from what might be called the Pyrrhonists or the sceptics. Of course, scepticism has a very long history: you can read about it among the ancients. If you look at Plutarch's essay on the malignity of Herodotus you will find already there certain implications about the fact that Herodotus, under the influence of certain unworthy biases, managed to magnify certain achievements of certain people at the expense of the even far greater achievements of certain other persons of whom Plutarch thought better; and there is an attack on Herodotus for prejudice, for bias, for dishonesty. This is not uncommon among historians then, as it is now. But if we turn to the modern period, already in the early sixteenth century Cornelius Agrippa, for example, mounts a considerable attack on historians for obvious historical bias. He says that it is quite clear that anyone writing history cannot avoid being influenced by political, by religious, by personal considerations, that objectivity is a completely unattainable ideal in human affairs, that people have passions, which govern them, that it is quite plain, if you read a historian, on which side he is, that partisanship is unavoidable, that different historians tell you different stories about exactly the same event, and you can always discover, if you try hard enough, why it is that they say these various things – that the idea of trying to establish some kind of objective truth out of the stories of so many, perhaps if not liars or perverters, at any rate people under the influence of all kinds of personal motives, is almost impossible.

Patrizi, who comes a little after him, says: After all, all history is founded on eye-witness evidence. Now, if you are an eye-witness of some important event, you are usually involved in it. If you are involved in it, you are on one side or the other of the story, and therefore you are bound to be partisan. If you are not involved in it, if you really are an objective historian writing at a later date – or even writing at the same date, but not connected with the event – then

you of course have to rely upon the information of people who *were* involved. Here there is an inescapable dilemma. Either you are involved in the events yourself, in which case you are hopelessly committed, by loyalty, by hatred, by love, by religious affiliation, by whatever it may be, to one side or the other in some major conflict – in which case your words could certainly not be regarded as in any way objective or detached. If on the other hand you are not so committed, then you are not allowed to see classified information, then you are simply at the mercy of the various participants, each of whom tries to sway you, whether by persuasion or by bribery or by other methods, into saying what they wish you to say. And this is called science, this is called truth, this is called reality! The whole thing is an absolute hotchpotch of people's subjective opinions, and, again, if anyone wishes to indulge in reading it, they can, but it is simply a way of titillating one's imagination and in no sense adds to the truth or to one's sense of reality.

That is the Pyrrhonist attack, which in a milder way people such as Montaigne and his followers to some extent took part in. Montaigne takes the view that it is very difficult to discover what the truth really is, that opinions vary, that things which are believed on this side of the Pyrenees are hated on the other side of the Pyrenees (which Pascal afterwards echoed), and that if one is a sensible person one accepts the opinion of one's age, one follows an ordinary sane, rational policy and one tries to keep out of trouble. But this is not exactly a tribute to the possibility of objective knowledge of the past.

This was extremely distasteful to Vico, whose whole Christianity to some extent rested upon historical evidences, as did that of the rest of the members of his Church. It is quite clear that this attack provoked a certain resistance in him. For a time he remained, as I say, a faithful, convinced Cartesian, but by 1709 or 1710 something occurred which caused a revolution within him, which converted him into one of the most original thinkers about history whom the world has ever known – that claim I would make for him.

He began to argue as follows. He said: It is perfectly true, in a certain sense, what Descartes says. Descartes regards mathematics as the queen of the sciences, quite correctly: mathematics is indeed a splendid system of unbreakable propositions, each connected by logical links with one another, which certainly cannot be improved upon as a kind of paradigm of irrefutable knowledge – except for

one thing, and that is that it is not knowledge at all. If you ask yourself what mathematics is, Vico says, if you consider what these various mathematical propositions are, after all, the symbols which you use are invented by you, the rules by which you connect them are also invented by you – they could be otherwise. The whole thing, in a certain sense, is a game. It is a form of play with symbols, whereby, if you play according to the rules, correctly, you arrive at the conclusions which anyone else playing by the same rules will arrive at. But to suppose that this is a transcript of reality, to suppose that mathematics is, as certainly Descartes must have supposed, a kind of copy of the bony structure of the nature of things, a representation of the basic categories of the actual universe – this is a completely invalid assumption.

He goes back to a proposition which was an old clerical platitude. Already Augustine had said that only he who makes a thing can truly understand it. If you make a thing, if you make a work of art, or if you make an object, then because you are its maker you know what it is and why it has been created, because you have created it, and you understand what its function is, because you have given it that function. In that sense God alone understands the universe, because God alone has made it. But you who have not made the world do not understand what the world is – you must simply take it for granted. You find the universe full of rocks and trees and animals and men; you have not created them, and therefore all you can do is simply observe what they are, how they behave, establish uniformities about them, establish what happens before what and simultaneously with what, and next door to what, and above what, and to the left of what – that you can record. You can also make certain general propositions which then form the body of your empirical science. But if you ask yourself why these things exist – why are there rocks? why are there trees? – then, since you have not made them, you cannot answer this question. If you are a poet, you can say why this line was written, because you have written it: you know your own motive. If you are a sculptor, you know why this particular piece of marble has been hewn in this particular way, because you have hewed it. But in the case of the objective universe only its creator can know.

Mathematics for Vico is precisely something which you have yourself made. Mathematics is wholly transparent. Nothing is secret, nothing is concealed, because you have made the symbols, you have

made the rules, and you manipulate them. It is, in a sense, though he does not use the analogy, like chess. You know about certain propositions in chess, you can guarantee them, because you yourself have invented them, because you abide by these rules. He lays down what is in effect a very basic difference between laws and rules. Laws are general propositions which attempt to record or describe the behaviour of objects independently of yourself, in the way in which the sciences do; whereas rules are things which you yourself have made, and the guarantee of which therefore lies in the creator's own mind. This is true of mathematics, this is true of all the deductive disciplines, all of which are governed by rules and not by laws.

Let me give an example which is commonly used in this case. Suppose someone says, 'How do you know that the pawn in chess can move only one square at a time, or on certain occasions only two squares?' The answer will be, 'Because that is the rule.' If somebody says to you, 'You say pawns can move only one or two squares at a time, but at the dead hour of the night, far and far away, long ago, I saw a pawn which actually managed to cross seven squares', this will not be regarded as a refutation of the proposition that pawns can move only one or two squares at a time under certain rules. That is Vico's case for mathematics.

But, he says, Descartes goes further and says that physics is a certain science. Not at all, says Vico. Physics is the application of mathematics to matter, to reality. Now reality is outside our control, and therefore once you begin applying mathematics outside reality, certain difficulties begin, a certain opaqueness sets in. Here we cannot be so certain. The material is more opaque. Since you have not made the rocks, since you have not made the atoms, since you have not made the molecules, since you have not made the stuff to which you apply your mathematics, your certainty is thereby to some extent diminished. Therefore Vico now tries to demote physics from the enormous pedestal on to which Descartes has lifted it by saying: Its certainty is only as great as the certainty of the mathematics which is applied to it. But since you cannot guarantee the behaviour of matter – and he says this before Hume – since you do not notice some kind of links in reality which could be regarded as necessary connections, which make it absolutely certain that matter will behave in the manner in which you say it will, since you cannot be certain, physics is less certain than mathematics. But because physics is less certain than mathematics, the allegation that

this is the paradigm to which we ought to try to approximate all forms of knowledge cannot be as valid as Descartes and his followers have tried to make it.

The big move, however, in the case of Vico occurs when, in about 1719, he suddenly makes the discovery that human history belongs to the creative, not to the given, side of this particular equation. He says: As for matter, about trees and stones and animals I can say only what they actually do, how they appear. I do not know what the purpose of a tree is, because I have not made a tree. I cannot say what a tree feels, or whether it feels anything, because I have never been a tree – this is the implication – but about human beings I *can* say this, because history is something which human beings make. I cannot attribute motives or purposes to things, largely because I do not think they have any. But even if they did have them I would not know what they were. But in the case of human beings I can do this, because I know what it is to have a motive, I know what it is to have a purpose, I know what it is to plan, I know what it is to strive for something, I know what it is to wish to create something. Therefore when I speak to other human beings or write about other human beings, I have what might be called an inside view. True, I cannot be certain of what their motives are, but I know what it is like to be a human being. When I write about Julius Caesar, when I write about Alexander the Great, I can in some imaginative sense transpose myself into their shoes. I can ask myself, even at that great distance: What must it have been like to have been faced with the Rubicon? What must it have been like to be a Macedonian conqueror?

And how do I know these things? How can I tell what it is like to be a human being in another context, at a previous time, in the sense in which I do not know what it is to be a rock, or what it is to be a table? Through three great doors, which have always lain open before us, but which no man has tried to use in the systematic manner in which I, Vico, am about to invite you to use them. These three doors are language, mythology and laws.

These were really very large moves in the intellectual history of mankind. Let me try to give an illustration of what I mean. Vico says, exactly as Herder said after him: Language is used by human beings in order to express some kind of attitude towards the universe, either to talk to other human beings or to express some kind of internal state, to offer a hymn to God, to utter cries of fear,

whatever it may be. It is used in order to express some kind of view, a view of things, an attitude towards things; and it is perhaps even a form of action in itself. Now when I look at the use of language by, for example, the ancients (which is what he knew most about), I will find all kinds of usages there which do not appear entirely intelligible to me. For example, I find that these beings from before my time use a great many metaphors. In my time, in the seventeenth century, there is a view that metaphor is simply a way of heightening ordinary speech, simply to make things more attractive, in the way in which poets use them, in the way in which people use them in, for example, formal orations. Metaphor is a form of talking more beautifully, talking more impressively, talking more memorably. Vico says: If you look at what ancient speech was like you will find that the extreme frequency of metaphors in it indicates that metaphor was a perfectly normal method of using words for the people of that time. It is not true, he says, that metaphor is simply a deliberate way of heightening speech. It may be so now, but it was not always so. It is not true that poetry is simply an elegant way of speaking, or a way to convey some kind of deeper, secret wisdom by means of memorable or rhyming expressions, or something of that kind. The use of poetry appears to be a very early human attainment, and therefore this seems to be a very natural form of human expression in its early ages. This of course is a sentiment which people of the Renaissance had already expressed.

How can this be so? Vico says: When a primitive man said 'The blood boils in my heart',¹³ which is a metaphor to us now, for the primitive man perhaps rage, which is what he was trying to express – anger – was literally much more like blood boiling in his heart than it is to us now. To us now this is a dead metaphor, and we therefore do not use it. A great deal of our language is simply an accumulation of dead metaphors which once had a living force. But to primitives anger really did resemble blood boiling in their hearts more than it does to us. So, he says, there is a whole collection of words: if you look at early poetry you will find – to use, for example, metaphors from the human body only – that they talk about teeth of ploughs, mouths of rivers, lips of vases, necks or tongues of land, veins of metal or minerals, the bowels of the earth, because for these people

¹³ References to the *New Science* (NS) are by the numbered paragraphs of the 1744 edition: here NS 460, 935.

vases did literally have lips, because for these people the earth did appear to have some kind of bowels, because the oaks really did possess something almost like beating hearts, because for these people skies actually smiled or frowned, and winds raged and tables groaned and willows wept and so on, whereas to us of course they do not do that now, and this is now a highly artificial use of language.

He goes on from there – and this brings him to the use of myth. He says that poetry is the first language of man, just as, he thought, no doubt quite correctly, dances were a very primitive form of human self-expression. If you look at ancient religion, he says, you will find that all these things operate there. Take for example, a saying like ‘omnia plena Jovis’ – ‘Everything is full of Jove.’¹⁴ What does this mean? What is Jove? Jove is a bearded thunderer, Jove is the father of the gods; but Jove is also the sky, Jove is also the whole of the air which we breathe. How can a bearded thunderer be the sky? What does it mean to say ‘Everything is full of a bearded thunderer’? To us it means absolutely nothing at all. But it must have meant something to those people, otherwise they would not have said it. What must ancient experience have been like, what must the experience of men at that time have been like for this kind of phrase to have meant something to them? Can you try to transpose yourself into a world in which this kind of sentence or expression describes something which someone wishes to express to someone else? No doubt it is very difficult for us now to try to penetrate this, to try to transpose ourselves into so very unfamiliar a universe; nevertheless, if you make a sufficiently agonised effort, perhaps it can be done. It is extremely difficult, says Vico, it is almost impossible, to enter into the vast imaginations of those crude and primitive peoples; nevertheless with a sufficiently appalling effort it is perhaps possible to make out what a world must have been like in which this kind of thing was said.

Then he sets off. The whole of mythology becomes for him an enormous symbolic expression of the early experiences of man. He no longer thinks, as earlier thinkers in the Renaissance thought, that Jupiter was just a euhemerism, that Jupiter was simply a very strong man whom the imaginations of men then promoted to being a God. He thinks that all kinds of primitive experiences, for example class warfare, which he stresses, took all kinds of imaginative forms

¹⁴ Vergil, *Eclogues* 3. 60; cf. Aratus, *Phainomena* 2–4.

because this was the only way in which these people could speak, because people start with hieroglyphs or ideograms, people try to convey their early experiences by means of some kind of primitive writing. Perhaps they do this even before they use actual articulate speech. By means of these hieroglyphs, by means of these ideograms, they tried to convey to each other what the world round them looked like – by means of very primitive art, which conveys to us a vision of the universe which is very different from ours. The view that these people saw what we saw, but saw it less well, which is after all the official view of the Enlightenment; that there is simply a progression whereby they made mistakes which we can now correct; that they believed in a lot of myths which were simply nonsense, or, as I say, planted in their heads by a lot of lying or unscrupulous priests, but now we can correct this; that Polybius was right, that it was simply a misfortune for mankind that priests and not philosophers presided over its birth – this cannot be true. There cannot have been philosophers at the time when mankind grew, because that is what primitiveness means – the use of these very peculiar means of self-expression, which reflect what the early lives of these creatures, before they became fully developed, must have been like. Therefore this is in a way the first attempt to reconstruct a universe wildly unfamiliar to us through the use of symbolism which must not be translated into contemporary symbolism, in terms of which it must necessarily make no sense. The attempt imaginatively to work out what things must have been like for this kind of symbolism to have been evocative of, or expressive of, or descriptive of it, is an extremely bold and original step in the history of self-explanation on the part of human beings.

At this point Vico runs riot. For example, he talks about the myth of Ariadne. Ariadne is really the art of seafaring. The labyrinth is the Aegean. Ariadne's thread is navigation. The Minotaur is various things: it might be pirates who abducted Athenians in the early ships, or it might be some half-caste child who was brought to the shores of the Greeks, and therefore symbolises some kind of early racial prejudice. The teeth which Cadmus plants are something to do with the landed nobles fighting against plebeians. So is Mars, wounded by Minerva, where Minerva stands for the nobility, and Mars stands for the plebeians. It does not matter whether his particular attributions have anything in them or not: the general notion is that all these things are attempts to convey various social experiences in

picturesque language, which was the natural language of those people at that time, and that from this something of the past can be reconstructed; in other words that myths are not simply false stories told by poets or false religious images stuffed into people's heads unscrupulously by priests, nor even elegant ways of conveying familiar truths in heightened and therefore more memorable language, or perverted ways of concealing facts, in the way in which the euhemerists thought, but some sort of key, some kind of code, in an almost Lévi-Straussian sense, to a way of cutting up reality, to a set of categories which are different from the categories which we use now. The world can be cut into all kinds of slices; the slices into which the creators or the users of the mythologies cut it are different from the way in which we cut it now. But it does not follow from this that they knew less about it, it does not follow from this that they were wrong, it does not follow from this that they were mistaken. This again is, of course, an extremely anti-illuminist, anti-Enlightenment point of view.

This is what Vico does with myths. So again with laws. Take, he says, for example, the Twelve Tables, the most ancient form of Roman law, which he calls a grave poem. We are told by the scholars of the classical tradition that the Twelve Tables were really a code of laws which was created by early Romans as a result of sending a mission to Athens, where they listened to the wisdom of Solon, who taught them about the niceties of Athenian legislation at the beginning of the sixth century, and they brought this back to Italy, and then, on the basis of the Athenian legislation, proceeded to draft the Twelve Tables. This, says Vico, is inconceivable. The Romans as we know them now from their myths and from their laws and from whatever relics we have are not the kind of people who could have begun to understand the kind of thing which Solon was doing in Athens. If you want further proof of this, they use words which have no equivalent in Greek. It is all very well Bruni saying that what can be said in Greek can be said equally precisely in Latin. But the word 'auctoritas', which is used in the Twelve Tables, has not the remotest equivalent in Greek of any stage. Therefore you can see that the notion that there is a transference of cultures, that all you have is a lot of emissaries going from one culture to another, peacefully translating from one language into another, is obviously not true. Romans thought in Latin, Greeks thought in Greek. Greek thoughts are not Latin thoughts. The thoughts of the Roman fifth

or sixth century BC are very different in character, because their universe is different in character, from the thoughts of the far more civilised Greeks of the same age. Therefore the whole notion of the continuity of human culture, a culture which begins, let us say, in Egypt, and then goes to Mesopotamia, and then from Mesopotamia goes to Persia – the whole story of the four monarchies, according to which you have first one monarchy and then another, and from Persia it goes to the Greeks and from the Greeks it goes to the Romans, and from the Romans it comes to us – all this is pure nonsense. It is quite clear that these civilisations must be understood in their own terms. They are not steps towards one another.

This is another strongly Herderian thesis. To regard one culture as a step towards another culture is to misunderstand it. Herder did his best to try, in spite of this, to conceive of some kind of united march of mankind towards a single, harmonious, peaceful ideal, called by him 'Humanität', but this is in strict contradiction to his earlier view that every culture is its own end, its own purpose, and that every human community with any kind of tradition, any kind of continuity and stability, possesses its own internal goals. Vico makes no bones about this at all. The Greeks were Greeks, the Romans were Romans, the Celts were Celts. There are certain parallels – one can discover certain common human qualities in them all – but the notion that there is a kernel of human nature, that there is something called 'man', who above all begins with certain beliefs, which then proceed to develop in some sort of systematic, slow, cumulative fashion, cannot be true, from all the empirical evidences that we have.

It is at this point that he mounts an enormous attack upon the most fashionable philosophy of his time, namely the notion of natural law. Most of the jurists and lawyers whom he consulted certainly believed, as Aristotle believed, as the Stoics believed, or the Christian fathers believed (some of them, at any rate), that there were certain basic propositions which men as men were born with, which were implanted upon their hearts by their creator – in the case of the Greeks, by nature, in the case of Christians or Jews, by a personal divinity. People differed about the catalogues of what these natural laws were. But there was a general agreement that, let us say, honouring your father and your mother, or not shedding blood for the sake of pleasure, as it might be, or in vain, were among these basic propositions which men as men accepted. Vico maintained

that the notion that primitive man, this half-savage beast – *orribili bestioni*,¹⁵ he calls them – hardly to be differentiated from some kind of anthropoid apes, with whom he thinks human history begins, that these persons were in some sense aware of sophisticated propositions of the type which can be incorporated in natural law, written upon our hearts in letters more lasting than bronze, as Rousseau said, was a historical absurdity. These beasts began, he thinks, in some kind of terrified state. I do not want to go over Vico's particular attempt to reconstruct human history because I do not think it is especially interesting, but broadly speaking he thinks that men simply began with terror of thunder in heaven; the first men, hearing thunder in heaven, were frightened, were terrified because they thought that the heavens were speaking to them, that some kind of force greater than themselves was in some way threatening them or thundering at them, and so, dragging their women into the caves, they laid the foundations of the first families – from total promiscuity the first families grew up – and then in defending their families they gradually created human steadings; and some of these men were powerful and created families and even tribes around them, while others were just ruthless vagabonds roaming through the original wild woods with which the earth was then covered, slaughtering everything which came their way. The weaker men fled from these vagabonds, and seeking protection from the original 'fathers', as he calls them, became their clients or their slaves; then, gradually revolting against them, forced them to write certain laws, forced them to create a constitution by which their lives were protected. Thus, says Vico, the first period is the period of the gods, or the period of the fathers, in which hieroglyphs or ideograms are used.

The second period is the period of powerful oligarchies, in which there are clients and patrons, in which there are masters and slaves. In this period the Homeric hymns are written. If you look at the Homeric hymns – and at the whole book of Vico devoted to the discovery of the true Homer, as he calls it – clearly these hymns are not written by any one person, they are the collective self-expression of the Greek consciousness of that period. He said this at a comparatively early date, a good deal, certainly, before Wolf, who demonstrated these propositions in a more scholarly manner

¹⁵ 'Fearful beasts', NS 374.

towards the end of the eighteenth century, and was very displeased to discover that Vico had said something of the same sort about a hundred years before. At any rate, he says that if you look at the Homeric hymns you will see that they must have been written by a people that was ambitious, savage, severe and avaricious. It is a magnificent poem which could have been written only in these conditions.

It must be remembered that Vico lived at the time of the great quarrel between the ancients and moderns. The question arose: What is superior? The poetry of the ancients, that is, the classics, or our modern poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? Vico is one of the few original thinkers who says: Every culture produces masterpieces of its own – or at any rate every work of art is the production of a particular culture at the particular place and date at which it is produced. The Homeric poems, which are an unsurpassed masterpiece (and it was quite an original thing to have said this then), can have been the product only of an oligarchical culture which was stern, avaricious and brutal. Later, civilisation set in. Later, laws were written, prose began, arguments began, lawyers were invented, democracy began, as did all kinds of excellent institutions under which a large number of human beings were no doubt liberated from a most intolerable thrall. But in this so-called civilised tradition it was no longer possible to write Homeric poems. The Homeric poems were necessarily the product of a far ruder, more primitive and more violent age. This is after all what Ferguson says afterwards.

This proposition, that there is no progress in the arts, that you do not begin with primitive art, which gradually becomes better and better and better – which is certainly one of the dogmata of the Enlightenment – is entirely new. The notion that an age may be detestable to us because of its brutality, because of its horrors, because of its bloodshed, but nevertheless may be the only precondition of the production of a particular kind of work of art, that it does not make sense to ask whether Racine is a greater poet than Sophocles, or whether Sophocles, even, is perhaps a greater poet than Homer, that every civilisation has its own values, that a particular culture can be understood only in terms of the particular forms of self-expression which it employs – this, I think, is a very considerable move in the history, certainly, of literary criticism. The notion, therefore, that poetry is not embellishment, that poetry is

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not a way of putting something which could be equally well put in prose, that poetry is the natural form [*12 seconds nearly blank on tape*] described and analysed – this, I think, is one of Vico's historic achievements.

I fear I have reached the end of my hour, and yet I have a very great deal more to say about Vico. But let me stop here and say that in my last lecture I propose to talk first of all about the war which Vico carried on against the most fashionable doctrines of his time – against Spinoza, against Hobbes, against Locke, against Bacon, and against the Enlightenment of his own time: in other words, the fight of Vico against Descartes is paralleled by the fight of Herder against the French Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. His situation is not dissimilar, and it is not dissimilar now: there are similar oppositions, there are similar conflicts at the moment. Having done that, I shall then try to consider whether indeed, as Italian scholars maintain, Vico emerged fully armed out of the head of Athena. If you read Italian commentators you will find that Vico has no anticipators at all, that he was one of the few men of genius who came out fully armed, without any anticipators, with nothing at all before him, one of the few totally original figures, who conceived these ideas out of nothing at all. It may be so, of course: as I say, we must not fall into the error of supposing that everything is derivative, otherwise nothing would ever have been thought at all. Nevertheless I think there is something to be said about Vico's predecessors and forerunners, which for some peculiar reason the Italian commentators are mysteriously silent about, but which nevertheless demands some examination.

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