One of the “elements” of Vico’s *New Science* (1744) is the following axiom: “Doctrines must take their beginning from that of the matters of which they treat” (par. 314). This seems scarcely more than an observation that any historically intelligible account of an institution, for example, ought itself to begin at that institution’s beginning. Begin at the beginning. Yet why did Vico consider this a novel axiom and claim it as his exclusive discovery? Unlike Descartes, Vico believed that the human mind had “an indefinite nature” (*l’indiffinita natura della mente umane*). Clear ideas are the last rather than the first things to be thought, for before he becomes a philosopher, a man, like all men without exception, begins his life as a child who in time sheds his childish beliefs and acquires the less imaginative, less poetic ideas commonly known as clear, distinct, and mature ones. Historically, therefore, the first instances of human thought are obscure images; only at a relatively late stage of historical development do men have the power to think in clear abstractions, just as according to “the universal principle of etymology in all languages, . . . words are carried over from bodies and from the properties of bodies to signify the institutions of the mind and spirit” (par. 237). Similarly, history is the passage from the obscure birth (*nascimento*) of things to their developed, institutional state: only then do they become clear, although their nature is determined by their beginning. A philosopher who tries to understand an institution like law uses a conceptual language far removed from the distant and murky circumstances from which the law originally derived. How, then, can Vico’s simple beginning axiom be followed? For according to Vico, in becoming more definite, more accurate, more scientific, the human mind in time became less grounded in
the body, more abstract, less able directly to grasp its own essential self, less capable of beginning at the beginning, less capable of defining itself. Or equally paradoxical, rational description is by definition a less accurate, more indefinite means than is imagery for describing certain concrete things. Just as children have indefinite ideas about philosophy, so too do philosophers have indefinite, or at least inappropriate, ideas about the childhood of institutions.

This intransigent fact cost Vico "the persistent research of almost all . . . his literary life" (par. 34). So universal a subject as his—"the common nature of the nations"—rested upon a simple axiom: one should begin such a study by discussing the beginning of nations. Yet all his and his readers' learning could not have been preparation enough for the following bizarre discovery of fabulous beginnings, arrived at after twenty years of research:

[This Science] must begin where its subject matter began, as we said in the Axioms. We must therefore go back with the philologians and fetch it from the stones of Deucalion and Pyrrha, from the rocks of Amphion, from the men who sprang up from the furrows of Cadmus or the hard oak of Vergil. With the philosophers we must fetch it from the frogs of Epicurus, from the cicadas of Hobbes, from the simpletons of Grotius; from the men cast into this world without care or aid of God, of whom Pufendorf speaks, as clumsy and wild as the giants called "Big Feet," who are said to be found near the Straits of Magellan; which is as much to say from the Cyclopes of Homer, in whom Plato recognizes the first fathers in the state of the families. (This is the science the philologians and the philosophers have given us of the principles of humanity!) Our treatment of it must take its start from the time these creatures began to think humanly. In their monstrous savagery and unbridled bestial freedom there was no means to tame the former or bridle the latter but the frightful thought of some divinity, the fear of whom is the only powerful means of reducing to duty a liberty gone wild. To discover the way in which this first human thinking arose in the gentile world, we encountered exasperating difficulties which have cost us the research of a good twenty years. We had to descend from these human and refined natures of ours to those quite wild and savage natures, which we cannot at all imagine and can comprehend only with great effort. (par. 338)

Man's world begins among stones, rocks, frogs, and cicadas, rather like Yeats's "foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart." This is quite another world from Plato's realm of forms or from Descartes's clear and distinct ideas. All of Vico's great book is an effort to give substance to the otherwise banished beginnings of human reality. Yet every time he describes man's beginning, Vico drastically qualifies his characterization with something like "we cannot at all imagine and can comprehend only with great effort . . . " Thus not only is it hard for modern man to locate his beginning, but even when he becomes aware of his historical aboriginality he cannot even truly imagine what it is.

Vico's place at the conclusion of a book on beginnings is earned by precisely this truth, as well as by the attitude toward scholarship it entails. So far as I have been able to discover, Vico is the prototypical modern thinker who, as we shall presently see, perceives beginning as an activity requiring the writer to maintain an unstraying obligation to practical reality and sympathetic imagination in equally strong parts; and in order to understand the debt owed Vico by a study on beginnings we must attempt finally to understand his work as having begun a significant process. By obligation I mean here the precision with which the concrete circumstances of any undertaking oblige the mind to take them into account—the obligation not just passively to continue, but the obligation to begin by learning, first, that there is no schematic method that makes all things simple, then second, whatever with reference to one's circumstances is necessary in order to begin, given one's field of study. And by referring to sympathetic imagination I mean that to begin to write is to "know" what at the outset cannot be known except by inventing it, exactly, intentionally, autodidactically. It is the interrelation between this obligation and the sympathetic imagination, however, that is crucial.

For the searching modern mind, as for our savage first fathers, a principle of "divinity" arrived at through fear and not reason "reduces a liberty gone wild." Only by imagining (divining = inventing) a force anterior to our origin, a force for Vico capable of preventing further regress into irremediable savagery, can we begin to intend to be human. The coincidence between bridles upon the primitive and the philosophical man is not gratuitous. Both the savage and the philosopher are alien to God's temporal order, to sacred history; for according to Vico, most history is a human and gentile affliction, whereas for the Jews there is a life "founded by the true God." Here Vico is at his most profoundly suggestive, and he uses etymological puns to make his point beautifully. A gentile savage or philosopher is tamed by the frightful thought of some divinity; "by contrast the Hebrew religion was founded by the true God on the prohibition of the divination on which all the gentile nations arose" (sul divieto della divinazione, sulla quale sursero tutte le nazione gentili) (par. 167). The crucial distinction is between the gentiles who divine or imagine divinity, on the one
hand, and the Hebrews whose true God prohibits divination, on the other. To be a gentile is to be denied access to the true God, to have recourse for thought to divination, to live permanently in history, in an order other than God’s, to be able genetically to produce that order of history. Vico’s concerns are everywhere with this other order, the word of history made by men.

Vico’s idea of beginnings has, I think, very far-reaching importance; for the modern reader to discover the accuracy of so proleptic and poetic an intelligence as Vico’s is an exhilarating experience. He is the first philosopher of beginnings, not because he was the first in time to think as he did (actually, Vico usually credits Bacon with that heroic achievement), but because for him a beginning is at once never given and always indefinite or divined and yet always asserted at considerable expense. He is also the first because, having rethought beginnings, he saw that no one could really be first, neither the savage man nor the reflective philosopher, because each made a beginning and hence was always being first. Vico’s discovery of a beginning common to primitive and contemporary man was the result of three tributary impulses, which in large measure have borne also upon the present book and which constitute a large part of its method.

First, Vico undertook to demonstrate that in certain provinces of thought or writing, a theory and an actual experience are interchangeable because directly adjacent. The notion of man, as the humanist conceives it, and the experience that man actually undergoes, in all its untidy diversity, are for Vico two sides of the same coin. To ascertain an actual point of historical departure (called today the search for roots) and to speculate on the nature of things in terms of an abstract origin not renderable accurately in language; these are the extreme opposites that Vico, as philologist and student of language, is able to think and maintain. He did this by diminishing the uniqueness of neither. This is why such grand ideas as the “mental dictionary” or the cycles of corsi and recorsi stand without intermediaries directly next to his descriptions of the primitive fathers copulating with their women in the mountain caves. It is no exaggeration to say that such feats as this were made possible for Vico by his special understanding of language. In language, Vico seems to have thought, either an abstract or a concrete word signifies (a) an indefinite meaning first, (b) thereafter, as one demands definition, a conditional meaning, and (c) a greater or a lesser distance from a main body of significance and from particular experience. The latter significa-

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**Conclusion: Vico in His Work and in This**

In Roman law *nomen* signifies right. Similarly, in Greek *nomos* signifies law, and from *nomos* comes *nomisma*, money, as Aristotle notes; and according to etymologists, *nomos* becomes in Latin *numus*. In French, *loi* means law, and *aloi* means money, and among the second barbarians the term “canon” was applied both to ecclesiastical law and to the annual rent paid by the feudal leaseholder to the lord of the land held in fief. (par. 433)

Such a habit of mind makes genealogical sequence, by which a word is traced back mechanically in a straight line to some root, a weak and unattractive prospect by itself. Vico always feels the presence of adjacent lines: *nomen*, *numus*, *loi*. When he wishes to characterize the earliest historical period, he breaks it down into a set of complementary systems of knowledge he calls poetic: poetic metaphysics, poetic logic, poetic history, poetic geography, and so forth. No one alone can exist without the others. Soon it appears to Vico that all knowledge during every historical moment is poetic in that the sinews between different branches bind these branches together despite an appearance of dispersion. The term poetic therefore signifies a relationship of adjacency asserted against logical, sequential continuity; a perfect analogy is the set of relationships obtaining between parts of the human body. As men grow more reflective and capable of seeing something other than their body, words reach further than the body and become abstract. The sum total of all words is a reflective idea that rather startlingly prefigures Mallarmé’s *Livre* containing all books. Each word in a dictionary is related to every other, again by systematic adjacency, much more rarely in genealogical lines. A poetic understanding of knowledge in a reflective period is what Vico calls philological science.

This, then, is the first tributary impulse in Vico’s thought: the direct presence to one another of the abstract and concrete in language is based upon the fundamental poetic adjacency of words.
to one another, another, an adjacency that Vico also sees in the first men congregating in families. All this entails a method of argument that moves from one constellation or cluster of ideas to another. For example, Vico says that pa is the first syllable uttered by man in imitation of a frightening thunderbolt. Doubled it becomes pape (father Jove), and Vico shows how all the primitive gods were imagined as fathers and mothers. Then he discusses patrare, the verbs impetrare, and impetrare; finally he asserts that "the first interpretation [interpretab] as if for interpatratio] was the interpretation of the divine laws declared by the auspices" (par. 448). Although Vico's subject is the common law of nations, and his ambition is to find a common beginning—a genealogical correlation, complementarity, and adjacency. Although his desire to locate a primeval beginning, a line of direct filiality, the material testimony of language and his learning restrain his desire, fruitlessly, because the mind can reexperience its making power by forging novel connections (the parallel etymologies of pa, for instance) again and again—thus adjacency, complementarity, parallelism, and correlation as methods employed in the interests of a genealogical goal. In what Vico called the gentle world, this does away entirely with such common hierarchies as a spirit higher than body, a meaning higher than evidence, a father who because he is older is wiser than his son, a philosopher or a logician who is more "rational" than a poet, an idea that is higher than clusters of words. It also does away with the Beginning that stands over and above all human effort.

The second tributary is Vico's ambition to understand himself and others in terms of a collective fate. In no philosopher before Marx, Freud, or Nietzsche does one find an assimilative capacity as great as Vico's. Because he takes words as his subject, no aspect of human experience can be relegated to the status of mere detail. In no respect is the enormous difference between Vico and his later eighteenth-century contemporaries Sade so minimal as in the catholicity of their interest in the detailed movement of bodies, for which words are an extension and symbol. This interest breaks down barriers between nations and dissolves hierarchical taboos; moreover, it is expressed as a gesture against nature (or—though Vico would never have admitted it—against religion). Man's collective fate lies in the creation of another world, which Vico called gentile.

As to the role of God or even of divine providence, Vico appears clearly a believer. "The clear and simple observation we have made on the entire human race," he says near the end of The New Science "... would lead us to say certainly that this is the great city of nations that was founded and is governed by God" (par. 1107). A few sentences later he says that the endurance of man's world "is a counsel of a superhuman wisdom" (par. 1107)—which he adds in the next sentence, divinely rules and conducts [the city of man]." Divinely here is not an unintended word. In recalling the divination upon which the gentiles base their polity (that is, the whole process of thought that makes the pun on divinity/indefinite a telling one), this phrase also prepares us for the following great summation, in which God or divine providence plays a nonexistent role:

It is true that men have themselves made this world of nations (and we took this as the first incontestable principle of our Science, since we despaired of finding it from the philosophers and philologists) but this world without doubt has issued from a mind often diverse, at times quite contrary, and always superior to the particular ends that men had proposed to themselves; which narrow ends, made means to serve wider ends, it has always employed to preserve the human race upon this earth. Men mean to gratify their bestial lust and abandon their offspring, and they inaugurate the chastity of marriage from which the families arise. The fathers mean to exercise without restraint their paternal power over their clients, and they subject them to the civil powers from which the cities arise .... [Here follows a series of parallel sentences, each beginning by saying that men mean to do what they did.] The nations mean to dissolve themselves, and their remnants flee for safety to the wilderness, whence, like the phoenix, they rise again. That which did all this was mind, for men did it with intelligence; it was not fate, for they did it by choice; not chance, for the results of their always so acting are perpetually the same.

In one thing above all else is man's indefinite mind definite: in its intention to be, an intention which is the zero point of man's existence. Human intelligence means for Vico the willed perpetration, the constantly experienced order of being. The collective human fate is far from a simple choice over extinction. It entails the historical creation (also constantly experienced) of an order of meaning different from (hence gentile—i.e., the world of the gentes and families) the order of God's sacred history. Man's beginning is a transgression; and so long as man exists, the fact of his existence asserts the beginning-as-transgression.
Yet Vico is too honest to his senses to ignore time and diversity. His primitive savages are conceived as having begun the gentile world, but not with having prescribed all its later developments. When he says that “mind did all this” (meaning human history), he is saying that human history is an order of repetition, not of spontaneous and perpetual originality. Theoretically, repetition implies sameness; but practically, as one looks around, one sees difference: different ideas, men, countries, habits, languages. Repetition is a reasonable idea, and it accounts for Vico’s reduction of all history to a recurrent set of three unvarying cycles, the ages of gods, heroes and men. And yet, in fact, difference or diversity is the detail—like the parallel and wildly varying etymologies of the same words in different languages—that is the unreasonable chaotic reality implied by reason. The curious coming and going in Vico’s *The New Science* between the relatively uninteresting sterility of the three cycles and the really powerful community of intractable human detail which Vico pours out with that unstinting philological zeal of his might very well have been of the kind Samuel Butler imagined for the Erewhonian Colleges of Unreason. “Unreason,” the colleges maintain, “is a part of reason; it must therefore be allowed its full share in stating the initial conditions.” Mind for Vico determines the choice men make when they make decisions, and also it determines the “perpetually sane” results. Analyzed further, the statement says that choice (not fate) makes as many different decisions as there are occasions. In their staggering variety they appear irrational—but only until their unreasonable chanciness is reduced to a set of categories (the three cycles) that seem after the fact to repeat a finite pattern of sameness ad infinitum. After that they appear rational.

If the second tributary impulse of Vico’s thought aids us methodologically to apprehend a collective human fate that embraces reason on the one hand and unreason on the other hand, his third impulse is to find a mode of expression in which to deliver his ideas. For the modern reader *The New Science* is not a tidy book, and its often postponed arrival at any sort of conclusion makes it perhaps a bad example of expository prose. Nevertheless, let us allow Vico to state his views on what he is doing:

> There must in the nature of human institutions be a mental language common to all nations, which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects. A proof of this is afforded by proverbs or maxims of vulgar wisdom, in which substantially the same meanings find as many diverse expressions as there are nations ancient and modern. This common mental language is proper to our Science, by whose light scholars will be enabled to construct a mental vocabulary common to all the various articulate languages living and dead. . . . As far as our small erudition will permit, we shall make use of this vocabulary in all the matters we discuss.

(par. 161)

Vico’s subject matter is viewed as a language, not as a series of events that actually took place. He posits a kind of concordance between “things feasible in human social life” and a set of conceptual formulations already existing in the mind. Just as what Vico elsewhere calls “the quasi-divine nature of mind” has an irreducible tendency to move itself, to transform its concepts inventively, this *ingegno* in mind virtually creates new social circumstances which express it. Yet his insistence upon the common and the feasible emphasizes Vico’s belief that mind is a finite set of possibilities, capable of so many many combinations and permutations, all of which are kept from *infinite* multiplicity by internal restraints. In short, he is arguing that although man’s mind is capable of so many transformations as to be inventive and creative, it is also restrained finally by its own rules based on the need for human community and social order. Those rules guarantee the endurance of man upon earth.

Consequently, *The New Science* never loses sight of its intention to describe man among men. Vico’s “small erudition” extended into several disciplines and languages: he therefore could write for and about the community of men. He was being consistent with his ambitions as a professor, set out with unusual eloquence as far back as 1708 in his *De nostri temporis studiorum nostri* and its community of men. He was being consistent with his ambitions as a professor, set out with unusual eloquence as far back as 1708 in his *De nostri temporis studiorum natione*. If the structure of *The New Science* is unusual at all, it is because at the level of the individual sentence and at the level of a section Vico is trying to describe the multitiered, but organized, realms of mind. His account of poetic morals, for example, goes from start to finish by describing the development of “virtues” from the most simple to the most complex; whereas in the next chapter, on poetic economy, Vico repeats the progression from simple to complex using different materials and arriving at a different sort of “poetic” structure. While all these sections can only be comprehended sequentially, by means of the parallels, correspondences, and allusions among them Vico aims to render them as though they occurred simultaneously.
The locus of Vico’s attention in his writing is the fable, which is strictly speaking not a historical narrative, nor an entirely fanciful invention, nor an unimportant embellishment of morals (as it was to many of his contemporaries). The fable is figured language, it is communal, it has a kind of repeatable originality, it is autochthonous—that is, it is set in a specific history and language. When Vico recounts Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield or the fable of Cadmus, he calls them repilogamenti della storia poetica (Vico’s English translators render repilogamenti as epitomes, not entirely an accurate choice, as I shall show in a moment). This is very different from the kind of attitude toward Greek myth one finds in Porphyry or Henry Reynolds, for example. Vico maintains that these fables recapitulate, in compressed language, general stages of real history. He ridicules none other than Erasmus for actually believing that Cadmus’ fable “contains the story of the invention of letters by Cadmus” (par. 679). What the repilogamenti are valuable for is that they are recapitations (not symbols, nor epitomes) by the Greeks themselves of their own history. These fables, therefore: (a) use a language that is at once historical and transparently belonging to “the mental language common to all nations”; (b) possess a particular narrative logic of their own so far as events in the story are concerned, although they are generally true to the main stages through which a period of history passed; (c) are original creations, and yet have neither a particular individual author nor any pretense to being more than rewritings of popular legend. Above all, the repilogamenti recapitulate history in such a way as to make that history available, through the disseminating power of “a common mental language,” to subsequent generations and other races.

One especially Vichian irony must be noted. Repilogamenti is a word related in its root to our word epilogue. How does one account for the conflation here of Vico’s thinking about beginnings and origins with his interest in a genre whose aim is to recapitulate in a final sense? I think Vico considered such peculiar human constructs as fables to possess the kind of primitive freshness that we still associate with folktales and legend, as well as a kind of intentional power for generality and truth that we normally associate with the classical historians or with the great national epics. Insofar as they are written—or at any rate, disseminated in time—the repilogamenti therefore cry out for decipherment and study. Because of their privileged position at the beginning moments of human actuality, they are also privileged subjects for late study; indeed, they are the final goal of study, even if they are not historically “true.” As Vico says in the first sentence of his essay on laughter, to contrast man’s inventive faculties with truth is absurd. Man’s divining, creative power is his first and—using the word in its double sense of “dominant” and “beginning”—his principal gift. All his subsequent efforts as a thinker should be directed at trying ultimately to understand that gift. In the words of Hölderlin:

Was der Alten Gesang von Kindern Gottes geweissagt,
Siche! wir sind es, wir; Frucht von Hesperien ist!“

II

Vico’s thought, as I have so far described it, is extraordinarily useful at this stage in that it parallels my key arguments throughout the preceding five chapters. Here is a schematic list of seven Vichian signposts that have helped me, from the beginning, to discuss beginnings and to sketch a method:

a. The initial distinction between the gentile or historical and the sacred or original—paralleling my distinction between beginning and an origin.

b. The combination in intellectual work of a special, idiosyncratic problem and a very strong interest in human collectivity—a combination that occurs in this text from the beginning.

c. An acute awareness not only of genealogical succession (except as its biological foundations obviously persist), but also of parallelism, adjacency, and complementarity—that is, all those relationships that emphasize the lateral and the dispersed rather than the linear and the sequential.

d. A central interplay between beginning and repetition, or between beginning and beginning-again.

e. Language as rewriting, as history conditioned by repetition, as encipherment and dissemination—the instability, and the richness, of a text as practice and as idea.

f. Topics for critical analysis that do not fall neatly into the categories of commentary, chronicle, or thematic tracings.

g. The beginning in writing as inaugurating and subsequently maintaining another order of meaning from previous or already existing writing. Here, once again, the distinction (made in a, above) between gentile and sacred becomes relevant.

*“What of the children of God was foretold in the songs of the ancients/look, we are it, ourselves; fruit of Hesperia it is!”