Language as "Always Already" Metaphor: The Primacy of Writing in Vico, Derrida, and Said

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Edward Said ends his book of literary criticism and theory, *Beginnings*, with a lengthy chapter devoted to the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico. The choice is especially telling since it follows the widely anthologized and very influential chapter, "Abecedarium Culturarum: Absence, Writing, Statement, Discourse, Archeology, Structuralism," devoted to an assessment of contemporary literary theory, including French structuralism and post-structuralism, and the works of Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault and Derrida. Why choose to end such a current study of beginnings, which wants itself to be a beginning of a new approach to literary inquiry, with a backward leap to the eighteenth century? Said explains:

All of Vico's great book [The New Science] 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.... (348-349)

A few pages later he enumerates those notions he has found useful in Vico's work. Allow me to quote the passage in its entirety:

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—parallelizing 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 of 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. (357)

These statements are probably sybilline for anyone who is not familiar with either Said's or Vico's books. By attempting to elucidate them I can perhaps best give an account of Vico's thought, or at least those of his ideas which seem to anticipate the notions proposed by today's deconstructionists, and more specifically some of the formulations of the contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the father and chief spokesman of Deconstruction.

Here again is Said's first point: "The initial distinction between the gentile or historical and the sacred or original—paralleling my [Said's] distinction between beginning and origin." The full title of the first edition of Vico's New Science was The principles of a new science of the nature of nations leading to the discovery of the principles of a new system of the natural law of the gentes. In the second and third editions he gave up the search for natural laws, considering them too abstract and ahistorical. His title was abbreviated to Principles of a new science concerning the common nature of nations. His aim is to give an account of the history of all nations at all times, an "ideal eternal history," but with an important qualification: this "ideal eternal history" applies only to gentile nations or gentes (peoples). The history of the chosen people, the Hebrews and then the Christians, was different, he says, because it was dictated or written directly by God. In the history of all other peoples divine providence worked and works much more obliquely, allowing, or perhaps forcing, men to create their own history, their own culture. Thus gentile history is man-made while that of the chosen people has a direct divine origin.

Said says that the notion of gentile history posited by Vico is similar to his notion of beginning; while the notion of sacred history is similar to the notion of origin which he wants to discard and replace with the more dynamic concept of beginning. The origin would be the ultimate cause or authority of a discourse or text, the generating matrix, the foundation or grounding at the very root, beyond which there would be nothing. Along with many other modern literary theorists, Said rejects
the possibility or the desirability of ever reaching such an origin. What we have instead in literature, and in culture in general, are ever-new beginnings, which are reiterations, reformulations of previous discourses, with no retrievable point of origin. Any discourse (or text, or language, or history) can only be a reelaboration of previous discourses, texts, etc., a repetition with a difference, in the words of Paul DeMan. Hence the formula "always already" which is on the lips and on the tips of the pens of all the deconstructionists these days— or the "deconites" as Wayne Booth has dubbed them. Language and history can exist only insofar as they have "always already" existed, only as imitation and differentiation in an already existing system.

In Said's reading of Vico, the notion of sacred history is introduced only to explain and validate the contrary notion of gentile history, which, he says, is the only history treated in The New Science and the only history that pertains to us. Thus we are not to see divine history as a real possibility so much as a desire, a nostalgia for origin, which activates and fuels the mechanism of gentile history which is reiteration.

It's very possible that this dismissal of divine history is to be attributed to Said rather than to Vico himself, whose religiosity remains a very thorny issue. Throughout his book Vico insists on the central role of providence and divine will in all history. However, humanist or materialist readers see such protestations as mere expedients to placate the still-active inquisition of his time: Vico was merely paying lip service to conventional religious ideas which actually played no role in his "new science." Animistic readers, on the other hand, say that it's arbitrary to dismiss something on which Vico seems to insist so much; and that providence does indeed play a central role in his scheme. How could Vico claim, for example, that history for all nations is a recurring series of cycles or stages, always the same and in the same sequence, if there were no providential master plan; if it were simply up to men to create their own history?

This is one of many paradoxes one finds in Vico, paradoxes which are not easily resolved, which perhaps cannot be resolved at all; and possibly paradoxes which make Vico such a vital figure today, the object of so many readings, approaches, juxtapositions, and interpretations. The bibliography on Vico in the last decade has been phenomenal. He has been posited as the precursor of every conceivable movement and of a wide array of thinkers and writers, from Marx to Nietzsche to Joyce.

But that's a wider problem, beyond the scope of this investigation. Let's go back to Said's list. The second Vichian signpost was "the combination in intellectual work of a special idiosyncratic problem and a very strong interest in human collectivity." The idiosyncratic nature of Vico's project was in the consciousness he had of establishing a new science which relied neither on material determinism nor on Platonic universals as points of departure and in his unorthodox procedure which relied on the study of myths and language, on far-fetched etymologies and puns, on a view of language as the repository of the definitions of meanings from past states of cultural consciousness. Vico's concern with "human collectivity" is manifested in his insistence on studying the
nature and behavior of nations or peoples, not individuals. When he speaks of the poetic faculty, he does not refer to individual poets, but to the cultural consciousness of an entire people during the second cycle of the "ideal eternal history," which consists of the divine or primitive stage when consciousness is controlled by the senses, the poetic or heroic stage when consciousness is defined by imagination, and finally the human or philosophic stage when consciousness is shaped by reason and abstract thoughts, after all of which there is a "ricorso," a period of decadence and return to the first stage. In any case, poetic wisdom and reflective wisdom are collective properties characterizing an entire society. In his search for the "True Homer" in the New Science, Vico concludes that Homer was the whole of the Greek people during their heroic age.

This emphasis on the "human collective" is probably more important to Said than it would be to either the Structuralists or Deconstructionists because his theoretical project is far more engaged, socially and politically, than theirs. Still, it's not just political commitment which is at stake in this dichotomy between the personal or idiosyncratic and the collective. There is also an adumbration of the Saussurean dichotomy langue/parole, language as a system and as individual speech acts. By his insistence on the collective nature of language and consciousness, Vico seems to anticipate the structural paradigm elaborated by Ferdinand de Saussure in linguistics and Claude Lévi-Strauss in anthropology and mythology: where signification does not inhere in the relationship between subject and object, but in the interplay of elements and functions within a system, or structure—the langue, which is there before and above and oblivious to the individual, even if it can be realized or manifested only through the utterances of individuals.

Though Derrida and Deconstructionists undermine or explode the notion of structures which they find too static, their deconstructive play in a field of floating signifiers still relies on a systemic notion of language based on differences and similarities. The subject is still emarginated. And yet, just as in Vico, despite this denial of the centrality of the subject, the discourse of French post-structuralists and deconstructionists, of Foucault and Derrida, and their American disciples, such as Hartman and Hillis-Miller and the other so-called Yale critics, tends to be very personal, idiosyncratic, and subjective. In both Vico and Derrida we seem to have a parole which both acknowledges and at the same time refuses its subjugation to langue; that is, to a system beyond its control, but not beyond its kamikaze attempts at sabotage—what Said calls idiosyncratic discourse and what Derrida calls deconstruction.

The third point Said draws from Vico is a corollary to the second. "An acute awareness not only of genealogical succession ... 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." Vico, of course, is concerned with genealogical succession. His account of recurring cycles and of the evolution of man from a primitive to a reflective state is both linear and sequential. And yet, he can accede to this diachronic perception of history only from a synchronic home base, that is from the cultural materials and their
contextualisation in his own time. One of his basic axioms is that men can only get to know the unknown by projecting onto it what they already know. This is an aid to knowledge, but also a limitation, a lens, but also a blinder or a filter. To minimize the filtering effect Vico resorted to the lateral approach admired by Said, looking not only at the common meaning of word, but looking behind it, or around it, or inside it, to see what residual meanings there might be which accompany the word and which might provide a glimpse at a former metaphorical or imagistic meaning in a different context.

This emphasis on the lateral and the dispersed also belongs to deconstruction. Derrida's notions of the trace, the supplement, the grapheme, etc., define language as a network of constantly displaced signifiers that never manage to link up to specific signifieds but bear traces of other signifiers. Language is never referential but "always already" metaphor, a continuous substitution.

Space prevents a detailed analysis of the other points that Said derives from Vico: 4) "A central interplay between beginning and repetition, or between beginning and beginning again"; 5) "Language as rewriting, as history conditioned by repetition, as encipherment and dissemination"; 6) "Topics . . . that do not fall neatly into the categories of commentary, chronicle, or thematic tracings"; 7) "The beginning in writing as inaugurating and subsequently maintaining another order of meaning from previous or already existing writing."

What all these remaining points seem to have in common—and what Vico, Derrida, and Said all seem to have in common—is that language starts as writing, not as some kind of natural speech. The identification of language with writing, rather than with oral speech, is of course the whole point of Derrida's Grammatology, which he posits in lieu of phonology. Derrida's work is a sustained and rigorous critique of western metaphysics, which he accuses of being "logocentric," based on the affirmation of the Logos, a complex word which suggests truth, logic, presence, origin—but also "word." Western discourse, Derrida claims, from Plato to Lévi-Strauss, through Rousseau and DeSaussure, has mistakenly privileged oral speech over written language, treating writing as a "scandal," an artificial and conventional, and hence deficient instrument with which to convey oral speech, which is in turn perceived as more natural, more pure, more innocent, more referential, more apt to express the subject or indicate the object in a direct manner. Writing, on the other hand, clearly relies on arbitrary symbols that stand for something else.

Derrida points out, however, that all language is writing, a system of arbitrary signifiers standing for something else. All language is metaphor, including oral speech whose signifiers are no more grounded than grams or ciphers or letters. If Plato and Rousseau and DeSaussure have chosen to express misgivings about writing but not about speech it is because of their need to affirm a Logos, a center or presence, a master sign, with which to endow their discourses and their lives with meaning. Deconstruction dismantles this "logocentric" discourse from the inside, showing what an elaborate, but false, construct it is.
Surprisingly, Vico, who was a contemporary of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of Derrida's main targets, also claimed that language is writing and that it originated as writing:

[The scholars . . .] all took the origin of letters to be a thing apart from that of languages, though the two were by nature connected, as indeed, the scholars ought have been warned by the words 'grammar' and 'characters.' By the first, because grammar is defined as 'the art of speaking' and letters are [grammata], so that grammar should have been defined as the art of writing, as it was by Aristotle, and as, in truth, it was at birth, since . . . being mute at first, the nations all spoke originally in writing. . . . Furthermore, had these letters been the shapes of articulate sounds and not . . . arbitrary signs, they would, like the articulate sounds themselves, have been uniform in all nations. But, having abandoned all hope of learning the [proper] mode, the scholars have not discovered that the first nations thought in poetic characters, spoke in fables and wrote in hieroglyphics, which should have constituted the principles, which by their nature must be most certain, both of philosophy, whose concern is with human ideas, and of philology, whose concern is with human words. (233)

In commencing our argument, therefore, we lay down as our first principle the following philological axiom: that the Egyptians asserted that in the whole previous duration of their world three languages had been spoken, correspondent in number and order to three ages which had elapsed in that world, the ages of the gods, of the heroes and of men; and of these languages they said that the first had been hieroglyphic or sacred or divine, the second had been symbolic or in signs or heroic coats-of-arms, and the third had been alphabetic, in order that the needs of daily life might be communicated among men distant from one another. (234-235)

To say that language began as hieroglyphics is to say that it began as metaphor, as a "standing for" that revealed its nature as arbitrary signifier, as trace, or supplement, as a scandalous substitution that suggested the presence of what it "stood for" only by revealing its absence. It's this complex interplay between absence and presence, Vico seems to say, which generates human language, human consciousness, and human culture.

Now, in pointing out this parallel between Vico and deconstruction concerning the primacy of writing, I don't wish merely to praise Vico as a precursor, or to accuse Derrida of an oversight with regard to Vico; although, these observations do support the claims made by the American philosopher Richard Rorty, among others, that Derrida and the Deconstructionists set up a straw man by insisting so stridently on the logocentric nature of Western discourse. According to Rorty it has been several centuries since Western thinkers seriously posited notions of truth or of a "master sign." Indeed, Western culture had already deconstructed
itself before Derrida offered to do it with such an unwarranted sense of urgency. If this is so, Vico surely had a hand in this deconstruction.

But, to repeat, there's more at stake than putting Vico in the corner with the deconstructionists. By juxtaposing Vico with Derrida and Said new vistas are created in each of their texts. The paradoxes and contradictions which are perhaps more discernible in Vico's text might lead us to perceive similar configurations in Derrida's text which otherwise would remain hidden. Furthermore, we might be led to perceive that the expression of contradictions is the whole point, that what they're all doing is continuing the game of bouncing absence and presence off each other.

The lesson that Vico can teach us about deconstruction and language is that ultimately the most important thing is not to determine what is at the end (or the beginning) of a semiotic chain--absence or presence, nothingness or divinity, matter or spirit. The most important thing may well be to remain suspended between the two--to play off absence against presence. Whether we perceive God as a human projection dictated by human fears and needs, or man as a creature formed in God's image--man's consciousness is still suspended between the two extremes, floating on a sea between the shores of affirmation and annihilation--and as the great Italian poet, Giacomo Leopardi, said in the last verse of his wonderful poem "L'infinito" (The Infinite): "E il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare" (And I find it sweet to drown in this sea).

WORKS CITED


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