

Vico's New Science of Ancient Signs

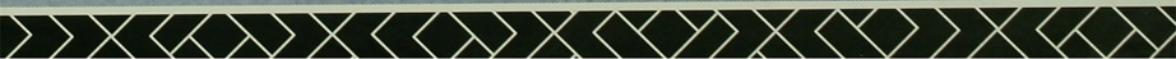
A study of sematology

Jürgen Trabant

Translated from the German by Sean Ward

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VICO'S NEW SCIENCE OF ANCIENT SIGNS

The Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico is primarily known as a philosopher of history. But his main intention was the foundation of “science,” true and secure knowledge, in the tradition of Bacon and Descartes. Contrary to both, Vico bases “science” on the “political world,” on society and culture, instead of on nature or pure reason.

The political world is mainly a world of signs and languages, and knowledge is always mediated through signs and languages. Hence, Vico's philosophy is a linguistic (or sematological) turn of philosophy—the first linguistic turn in the history of philosophy. This book reads Vico's fascinating *New Science* as a landmark in language (and sign) philosophy. Vico's sematology and his theory of signs (*semata* in Greek) contain important insights into the function of signs and language for human thought, the relation between images and language, gestures and language, and memory and language. These ideas are discussed within the framework of eighteenth-century philosophy and with constant attention to contemporary linguistic and philosophical discussions.

Vico's New Science of Ancient Signs will be essential reading for advanced students and academics within the fields of linguistics and philosophy.

Jürgen Trabant is Professor of French and Italian Linguistics at the Free University, Berlin. His main fields of research are the history of linguistics and language philosophy, and semiotics, especially semiotics of literature and language politics. **Sean Ward** is a writer and translator. He lives in Arlington, Virginia, and is co-editor, with Jürgen Trabant, of *New Essays on the Origin of Language* (2001).

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Translated from the German by Sean Ward
Foreword by Donald Phillip Verene

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FOREWORD

It is a pleasure to have Jürgen Trabant's work available to an English-reading audience. Until now those who did not read it in German had access to some of Trabant's interpretation in his essays in *New Vico Studies* that appear here in new translation as Chapters 5 and 6. When *Neue Wissenschaft von alten Zeichen* appeared as a Suhrkamp pocketbook in 1994 it was evident that Professor Trabant had advanced a full interpretation of Vico that was unique in Vico literature. Rereading it in the English translation of Sean Ward has caused me to rethink its ideas.

Trabant states the thesis of his work quite clearly at the beginning, that "Vico's philosophy is not really a philosophy of language but a philosophy of signs." To capture this idea Trabant has used the term "sematology" instead of "semiotics" or associated terms. It is certainly correct to comprehend Vico's philosophy as a philosophy of signs rather than a philosophy of linguistic signs. Language is only one among a number of types of signs or "symbolic forms," as Ernst Cassirer calls them.

Cassirer regarded Vico as the real discoverer of the myth and a turning point in the history of the philosophy of language, as he makes clear in the first two volumes of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. He also saw Vico as the founder of the philosophy of the *Kulturwissenschaften*, as he explains in his *Logic of the Cultural Sciences*. At the basis of culture is not language but the phenomenon of human expression that is formed by the sign or symbol.

In the third chapter Trabant remarks that Vico reconceives the classical notion of the human being, not as *animal rationale* or *linguisticum* or *phoneticum*, but, in Cassirer's terms, as *animal symbolicum*, the term Cassirer coins in *An Essay on Man* to characterize the sense in which the sign or symbol is the unifying feature of human culture and to emphasize that human rationality always finds its embodiment in the symbol. For Cassirer one form of thought is not more "symbolic" than another. The images of poetry and myth are symbols as are the ciphers of mathematics. They are different types of symbolism, each with its own logic, but both originate in the distinctively human power of the symbolic act. Cassirer's and Vico's philosophies are not the same, but there is a great sympathy between

them. They both support the point present in Trabant's thesis, that the philosophy of language is too narrow an approach to understand the basis of the human world; we must turn to the wider notion of a philosophy of signs, a sematology.

Vico's doctrine of signs is closely tied to his conception of a "common mental language" or "common mental dictionary" that he mentions only a few times, although prominently, in the *New Science*. This is a concept that Vico's commentators have remarked on but at the same time avoided. Trabant's work, against this tradition of the commentators professing the common mental language to be an obscure idea of Vico, has an extensive analysis of its meaning and importance, calling attention to its presence in the first *New Science* of 1725.

One of the welcome features generally of Trabant's approach to Vico is his attention to the relation between the 1725 *New Science* and the second version of 1730/1744, a relation that most commentators ignore, concentrating solely on the later version. Much is lost of a means to understand Vico by ignoring the statements in the first edition. The common mental language is a case in point. The first *New Science* contains a chapter on the nature of this idea, and it is one of the three passages of the first *New Science* that Vico declares should be preserved and reprinted, if necessary, alongside the second version, to properly grasp his thought.

The common mental dictionary is formed, Vico says, from the divine language of acts and objects, with natural relations to the ideas they signify, the heroic speech that followed immediately from it, and the prose speech, the articulate language of the distinctively human institutions that succeed the heroic world. Vico philologically works out the nature of these three languages that comprise the common mental dictionary, through analysis of particular words in particular languages. Trabant points out that "There is obviously nothing a priori about the common ideal language. It is not a dictionary of pure concepts in the Kantian sense. Instead, the eternal properties of its mental words originate in the poetic characters, the *sēmata*" (p. 66). Trabant also says: "Universal common mental words constitute mythology in its broadest sense. This is Vico's version of concrete universals" (p. 67).

Vico's conception of the particular in the universal is rooted in his doctrine of "poetic characters" or "imaginative universals," which is the subject of the second chapter of Trabant's work. Trabant rightly stresses that Vico's theory of poetic characters or imaginative universals is not simply a logic of the imagination. Trabant says: "The universal nature of the poetic characters links Vico's discovery with the project of a new science in the strict sense of a science dependent on reason" (p. 30). Imaginative universals are not just universals inherent in poetic wisdom understood as a part of the human or civil world. Imaginative universals are the universals actually underlying historical and empirical data.

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By contrast, one can point here, I think, to Kant's "reflective judgment," his doctrine of the *reflektierende Urteilskraft* of the third *Critique*. This is a type of judgment in which the particular is grasped as having universal meaning, but such judgments are confined to the sphere of the aesthetic and organic. They are offset by determinate judgments which subsume a particular under a rule, such as found in scientific and theoretical thought. The Kantian subjective universal is not truly universal in the Vichian sense of what is truly original and primordial. Vico regards imaginative universals as not simply a key to part of culture but as a key to culture itself. Imaginative universals are truly universals and are at the basis of his science.

Trabant maintains that Vico's common mental language or dictionary is not only a subject of Vico's science; it is also employed as the language through which Vico's science is realized. As Trabant says: "it is what ensures that the project is truly scientific. It is the new language appropriate for a new science" (p. 72). This is to say that Vico thinks from the standpoint of the meanings of the common mental dictionary. He intends to have a universal understanding of the world of nations to say what the civil world actually is.

Against the historicist approach to Vico, Trabant rightly points out "the universalistic bent" to Vico's thought. He argues that although Vico opposes the civil to the natural world, this does not mean he conceives the historical world in the terms of a modern historian of thought. As Trabant states:

It above all does not mean that he distinguishes, in the manner of Wilhelm Dilthey, the method proper to the human sciences (which seek to understand individual historical forms) from the method proper to the natural sciences (which seek to explain natural phenomena). On the contrary, Vico upholds the traditional standards of scientific inquiry. He does not propound a hermeneutic theory of science.

(p. 74)

Vico's aim is a new science of the civil or human world that will stand alongside the new science of the natural world. It is good to have this claim of Vico so clearly stated, as there has been so much confusion on this point, so many attempts to modernize Vico's conception of history.

Although Vico makes a distinction between the science of the civil world and the science of the natural world on the basis of his principle of *verum et factum convertuntur*, this does not mean that there are two different forms of thought involved. The natural scientist aims at the principles of natural events, the knowledge that results will remain incomplete because the objects to be known are not made by the knower. The natural scientist comes closest to making the object in the construction of

experiments, as Vico says in the *Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*. Experiments in natural science are so important because they emulate the conversion of true and made that is the hallmark of the new science of the nations. The science of the nations can convert the true and the made. Since the civil world is made by humans it can be known by them, but this conversion cannot be done perfectly.

The three ages of ideal eternal history that are the presence of Providence in the movements of nations are not made by human knowers; they are begotten by God. Thus the principle of the conversion of true and made is itself dependent upon a principle that is not made by the knower but is given, and the knowledge of the divine reality from which it is given is not itself convertible by the principle of conversion this reality supports. Science, for Vico, follows a single principle, it is not “understanding” on the one hand and “explanation” on the other.

Two further points I find quite striking in Trabant’s interpretation are his emphasis on the sense in which writing and speech or singing are twins and his account of the originality of Vico’s inclusion of ingenuity (*ingegno*, *ingenium*) in the structure of memory. The traditional view has been that *logos* proceeds from thought to speech, to phonetic-acoustic semiosis. Vico recognizes the existence of both visual and acoustic signs but regards writing, in the sense of mute gestures and emblems, as primary. As visual semiosis or “writing” recedes, phonetic semiosis develops and prevails. Trabant points out that, although Vico could not have known this, biological research confirms his view. Primates can communicate in visual gestures, but phonetic language seems to be a specifically human activity, related to the evolutionary development of the brain.

Vico associates *memoria*, *fantasia*, and *ingegno* as the parts of memory. To associate *memoria* and *fantasia*, memory and imagination, is not new in the tradition of European thought, as it goes back to Aristotle in his treatise *On Memory*, but Vico is unique in adding *ingegno* to these two. Trabant maintains that Vico’s introduction of *ingenium* into memory brings it close to the classical ability of *inventio*. Vico does this through his work on rhetoric. *Inventio* is classically the first step in the preparation of an oration, that of gathering the materials of the subject, which leads to *dispositio*, their arrangement, and *elocutio*, their expression in language. This is part of Vico’s placement of *ars topica* over *ars critica*. Memory becomes, on Vico’s view, the source for invention, which gives things remembered a new turn or puts them into proper arrangement. “Vico’s concept of *memoria*,” Trabant says, “stands less on the side of *mnēme* (retention) and more on the side of *anamnēsis* (recollection)” (p. 121). Once memory has brought forth a subject in this way, the philosophers are able to apply the art of criticism to what has been invented.

These are some of the views that have been prompted by my rereading of Trabant’s provocative work. I do not intend them to be representations

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of his views, for his work speaks eloquently for itself. Each reader will need to make the points he brings up for himself or herself, as Vico says is needed for the comprehension of his science. The later chapters of Trabant's work contain rewarding discussions of Vico's connections to Rousseau, Herder, Hegel, and Humboldt. Especially interesting to me is the treatment of Derrida and Trabant's point that Derrida could have made much more use of Vico, to his advantage, that "Hardly any other philosopher of the past would make a better compatriot for Derrida than Vico . . . Derrida misses the opportunity to establish a European tradition for his project."

Had Derrida made more use of Vico his own approach might not have been so original. He might have been changed by Vico. But that has been Vico's fate; many thinkers have come to his thought late, when their own views are formed. They use Vico for their own purposes, a fate that, Isaiah Berlin says, is true of obscure but original thinkers.

Trabant's interpretation of Vico has not said all there is to say. An emphasis on Vico's doctrine of signs says little about Providence and Vico's metaphysics, and it does not go fully into Vico's use of law and the concept of ethics, human action, and prudence that may lie therein. These are not Trabant's themes, nor need they be. What the reader will surely appreciate, in addition to the subjects discussed, is the direct, insightful, and occasionally personal way that they are discussed, such as Trabant's meditation on whether Vico's frontispiece allows him to recall the new science, as Vico claims it will for the reader. It is an illustration that the reader must make Vico for himself or herself, and Trabant has without doubt given us a great aid for so doing.

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Besides the most obvious one, there are three differences between this translation and the original German edition:

- 1 The final chapter of the original edition, which discusses Vico's reception in Germany, has been replaced with the chapter on Vico and Wilhelm von Humboldt from Professor Trabant's *Traditionen Humboldts* (Trabant 1990a). In addition, Professor Trabant and I agreed on a number of minor changes to the text, none of which alters the original edition's thesis or the way this thesis is argued.
- 2 The German edition uses footnotes, whereas this edition has endnotes. A one-to-one translation of footnotes to endnotes would not have taken into account the extra effort (thumbing through the back of the book) required to consult the latter. I have therefore incorporated many former footnotes into the main body of the text.
- 3 The English edition is more resolutely monolingual than the original German version, which contains a large number of quotations in Italian, French, Latin, and English. I have provided key terms in the original Italian, Latin, German, or French when they are first introduced. In most cases, I subsequently refer to the English term only. The two exceptions to this rule are several French translations of Vico in Chapter 5 and a number of short quotations in Chapter 8 from an article Humboldt wrote in French. Both seemed curious enough to warrant inclusion and cognate-laden enough to be understood by English speakers whose French isn't what it used to be.

Considering Vico's preoccupation with Descartes (Professor Trabant deals with this in detail in Chapter 1), it seems appropriate to end this translator's preface with an excerpt from the translator's preface to an English edition of Descartes's *Discours de la méthode* published in 1649:

[The author of this work] is best made known by Himself, and his Writings want nothing but thy reading to commend them. But as

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those who cannot compass the Originals of *Titian* and *Van-Dyke*, are glad to adorne their Cabinets with the Copies of them; So be pleased favourably to receive his Picture from my hand, copied after his own Design . . . Now although my after-draught be rude and unpolished, and that perhaps I have touch'd it too boldly, The thoughts of so clear a Minde, being so extremely fine, That as the choisest words are too grosse, and fall short fully to expresse such sublime Notions; so it cannot be, but being transvested, it must necessarily lose very much of its Lustre: Nay, although I am conscious (notwithstanding the care I have taken neither to wrong the Authors Sense, nor offend the Readers Ear) of many escapes which I have made; yet I so little doubt of being excused, That I am confident, my endeavour cannot but be gratefull to all Lovers of Learning; for whose benefit I have Englished, and to whom I addresse this Essay . . . To such as these I present this Discourse (whose pardon I beg, for having so long detain'd them from so desirable a Conversation) . . .

(Descartes 1649: n.p.)

Sean Ward

REFERENCES, EDITIONS, ABBREVIATIONS, ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sources are referenced in the body of the text. As is customary in the Vico literature, quotations from the *New Science* are cited not by page number but by the paragraph numbering system introduced by Fausto Nicolini.

The Bergin and Fisch translation (Vico 1988a) is the source for English quotations from the *Third New Science*. David Marsh's 1999 Penguin Classics translation had not yet been published when I finished the first draft of *Vico's New Science of Ancient Signs*. By that time, I had developed a relationship with Professors Bergin and Fisch that I saw no reason to sever.

I have abbreviated the references to six of the most frequently quoted sources. A list of the abbreviations is below. Complete bibliographical information for these and all other sources can be found in the list of works cited at the end of the book.

A	Vico (1975)
Paragraph number only	Vico (1988a)
<i>FNS</i> (<i>First New Science</i>)	Vico (2002)
D	Descartes (1985)
R/H	Rousseau/Herder (1966)
H	Humboldt (1903–1936)

I would like to thank Cambridge University Press for permission to quote from John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (eds), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* © Cambridge University Press 1985; and from Giambattista Vico, *The First New Science*. Edited and translated by Leon Pompa. © in the English translation and editorial matter, Cambridge University Press 2002.

I am indebted to Cornell University Press for permission to quote from three books: Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico: Unabridged Translation of the Third Edition (1744) with the addition of "Practice of the New Science."* Translated by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch. Copyright 1948 by Cornell University. Revised and abridged edition copyright © 1961 by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold

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I would like to thank the University of Chicago Press for permission to quote from *On the Origin of Language*. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Essay on the Origin of Language*. Translated by John H. Moran and Alexander Gode. © 1966 by The University of Chicago.

In addition, I would also like to express my gratitude to Professor Leon Pompa, who generously sent me copies of his erudite translation of Vico’s *First New Science* at several stages of its genesis; to Professor Donald Phillip Verene, who took time out from his own research to write the foreword to this book; and to Celeste Ward, who spent an entire weekend on the couch, patiently reading and improving her husband’s prose.

Sean Ward

INTRODUCTION

“I wish you’d die, Proetus, if you don’t kill Bellerophon!
Bellerophon’s bent on dragging me down with him in lust
though I fight him all the way!”

All of it false

but the king seethed when he heard a tale like that.
He balked at killing the man—he’d some respect at least—
but he quickly sent him off to Lycia, gave him tokens,
murderous signs, scratched in a folded tablet,
and many of them too, enough to kill a man.

(Homer 1990: 201)

Only once in the entire *Iliad*—in the verses quoted above from Book Six—does Homer mention writing. In the *New Science*, Giambattista Vico refers to these murderous signs (*sēmata lygra*) four times. The first time, Vico points out that the message King Proetus scratched (*grapsas*) in a folded tablet and gave to Bellerophon to take to his father-in-law (Vico gets the father-in-law’s name wrong) must have been written in signs because alphabetic characters did not yet exist: “So Homer, in whose time so-called vulgar letters had not yet been invented, says Proetus’s letter to Eureia against Bellerophon was written in *sēmata*, signs” (§433). The second time, Vico suggests that Proetus’ “fateful message” (*sēmata kakon*) (Homer 1990: 201) was a prototype of the visual signs of the symbolic language that was, according to Vico’s theory, characteristic of humanity’s second stage of development:

The second kind of speech, corresponding to the age of heroes, was said by the Egyptians to have been spoken by symbols. To these may be reduced the heroic emblems, which must have been the mute comparisons which Homer calls *sēmata* (the signs in which the heroes wrote).

(§438)

The third time, Vico again adduces the Homeric *sēmata* as examples of the visual signs that were typical of mankind's second age, of "the heroic characters used in writing by the heroes, which Homer calls *sēmata*" (§446). Finally, as part of the philological evidence for the discovery of the True Homer, Vico repeats his assertion that the poets of ancient Greece had no knowledge of the alphabet but only of primitive, heroic signs: "We may add that Homer never mentions vulgar Greek letters, and the epistle written by Proetus to Euraia as a trap for Bellerophon is said by Homer to have been written in *sēmata*" (§859).

It is Vico's repeated reference to Homer's heroic *sēmata* that has prompted me to call the *New Science* a "sematology." The term is intended to make clear that from beginning to end the *New Science* is a science of signs. In this sense, I could also have chosen to refer to it as a semiotics or a semiology, which brings me to the second reason why I selected the term. By speaking of Vico's sematology I wished to underscore the individuality of his sign theory. For homing in on the Homeric *sēmata* is not, I maintain, terminologically idiosyncratic or reductive. Although the word *sēmata* appears just four times in the *New Science*, heroic signs—the semiotic entities that Vico equates with the Homeric *sēmata*—are in fact at the center of Vico's theory of language.

As for the term "sematology," it is actually neither my coinage nor all that idiosyncratic. Indeed, for a time it vied in academic discourse with the more familiar terms "semiology" and "semiotics," though the latter pair ultimately won out. Benjamin Humphrey Smart, an English philosopher, wrote the *Outline of Sematology* in 1831. The German psychologist Richard Gättschenberger used the term at the beginning of the twentieth century, as did Karl Bühler.¹ My usage of the term is unrelated to the work of Smart, Gättschenberger, or Bühler. Yet it is somehow appropriate that a word that lost the terminological struggle should be the one to refer to Vico's semiotic project.

It might be helpful at this point to make two distinctions. First, Vico's new science of ancient signs is not a Peircian semiotics, though it has more in common with Peirce's work than previously thought. Peirce's semiotics is in the Lockean tradition, and Vico is no Lockean.² Second, Vico's sign theory is not a Saussurian semiology, with which it has less in common than previously thought. Saussure's semiology is based on spoken language (*langue*), of which Vico's sematology aims to be a critique in the Kantian sense. Though neither Peircian nor Saussurian, Vico's theory is the heroic (but significantly less influential) forerunner of these projects.

In sum, the title of this book seeks to encapsulate its thesis; namely, that Vico's philosophy is not really a philosophy of language but a philosophy of signs (which, as with Peirce's semiotics, is both an advantage and a specific limitation of Vico's theory). I am convinced that sematological issues

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put readers on the road that will take them to the center of Vico's intellectual world. For this reason, this book also serves as a general introduction to Vico's thought, not only to one of its many facets.

I refer those interested in the biographical and historical details of Vico's life to Peter Burke's fine book (Burke 1985). I also encourage them to read *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, in which he describes his intellectual development up to the *Second New Science*, published in 1730. The *Autobiography* remains the best introduction to Vico's main philosophical themes, which is why I shall begin my study of Vico's sematology by turning to his autobiographical self-portrait.

MR. VICO, RENATO, AND PHILOLOGY

A light in the darkness

To an even greater degree than is customary in Italian, Vico Italianizes the names of foreign authors. He refers to Hobbes as Obbesio, Grotius as Grozio, and Leibniz as Leibnizio. In the case of Locke and Newton, Vico assimilates their first names, which become Giovanni and Isacco. It almost seems that the greater a thinker's importance to Vico, the more likely Vico is to adapt his name. It is René Descartes whose name undergoes the most thorough Italianization. Vico calls him Renato Delle Carte, which is really more a literal translation ("Renatus of the Cards") than an adaptation. This extreme degree of appropriation, along with the fact that Vico often refers to Descartes simply as Renato, underscores Vico's particularly intimate relationship with Cartesian thought. Without Renato we can't begin to understand Giambattista. Descartes is Vico's lifelong intellectual antagonist, and for this very reason he is the catalyst as well as the context for Vico's thought.

The *Autobiography* provides perhaps the clearest example of Vico's preoccupation with Descartes, for the book is consciously aimed at Descartes's self-portrayal in the *Discours de la méthode* (*Discourse on the Method*). The *Discourse* introduces the celebrated I that thinks and therefore exists by using—what else?—the first person singular. Vico, by contrast, writes about himself in the third person. Following the famous prefatory remarks about common sense, Descartes begins his story of philosophical discovery with a triple reference to the first-person narrator: "For *my* part, *I* have never presumed that *my* mind" (D: 111). From the first sentence of his *Autobiography*, however, Vico sets a "he" in opposition to Descartes's I. In fact, Vico takes an additional step back from the subject of his narrative by referring to himself as *il signor*: "Mr. Giambattista Vico was born in Naples in the year 1670 of upright parents" (A: 111). As it happens (and in what is perhaps an example of first-person forgetfulness), Vico was born in 1668.

Although he eschews an egocentric approach, Vico does individualize

and historicize the “he” that he has introduced. He defiantly replaces the abstract and atemporal Cartesian I—which has no name, no origin, and no precise locus—with a historically situated individual complete with a name, a place and year of birth, and parents.¹ Against the Cartesian “fable” of abstract subjectivity stands the history of a real man named Giambattista Vico.²

Readers who do not pick up on the intertextual critique of the *Discourse* contained in the opening sentences of Vico’s *Autobiography* are soon enlightened. For Mr. Vico, the autobiographer announces, had experiences similar to those of Renato Delle Carte. In contradistinction to the *Discourse*, however, the *Autobiography* contains an honest account of them. Like Descartes, in his youth Mr. Vico is driven to despair by what he learns from his teachers and books. Vico, too, gives up his studies and for a year and a half is AWOL from the academy. But the impecunious Neapolitan can’t afford a grand tour that would enable him to read in what Descartes calls the great book of the world (which Descartes of course ultimately casts aside, since, for Descartes, truth resides in the bookless and solitary space of the pure self). Unlike Descartes, Vico returns to his books after an eighteen-month absence.

Vico cannot bring himself to believe Descartes’s autobiographical report. It was fabricated, he scolds, with a single purpose in mind: to serve as propaganda for Descartes’s philosophical method. As Descartes recommends to his audience, Vico reads the *Discourse* as a fable, but as a fable in the pejorative sense. He contrasts Renato’s fictional account—twice Vico uses the verb *fingere*—with his own factual chronicle:³

We shall not here feign [*non fingerassi*] what Renato Delle Carte craftily feigned [*finse*] as to the method of his studies simply in order to exalt his own philosophy and mathematics and degrade all other studies included in divine and human erudition. Rather, with the candor proper to a historian, we shall narrate plainly and step by step the entire series of Vico’s studies, in order that the proper and natural causes of his particular development as a man of letters may be known.

(A: 113)

Renato’s narrative is the antitype from which Vico seeks to distance his own self-portrait, which for this very reason remains inextricably linked to the great Renato. The *Autobiography* is explicitly organized along the same lines as the *Discourse on the Method*. Peter Burke’s assertion that the *New Science* can be viewed as a sort of large-scale *Discourse* is not, then, the exaggeration it might first appear to be (Burke 1987: 93). In fact, it would not be inaccurate to extend Burke’s *aperçu* to Vico’s entire philosophical oeuvre.⁴

The nub of Vico's disagreement with Descartes is apparent from the first time Renato is mentioned in the *Autobiography*. For Vico, the erasure of all erudition from the slate of the human mind in order to establish a more stable foundation for knowledge is the fictitious product of an overweening ambition. Divine and human learning cannot simply be blotted out. Yet it is precisely the gesture of erasing erudition and jettisoning the ballast of tradition that Vico adopts from Descartes. Of course, Vico only does so in order subsequently to restow—and rearrange—the ballast and reinscribe the mind's blank slate. But the main thrust of the Cartesian project is retained. Giambattista asks the same question as Renato. He arrives, though, at a very different answer.⁵

So it is that Vico introduces his central philosophical and epistemological thesis, which has been dubbed "Vico's axiom," in a narrative that imitates Renato's account of his discovery of the *cogito*.⁶ In Book I of the *First New Science*, published in 1725, Vico, like Descartes in part one of the *Discourse*, tells how he went astray in his search for certain knowledge. Vico, too, got lost among the philosophers' opinions and the abundance of historical data. This led him to new uncertainties and greater obscurities. In order to escape from this "long, dense night of darkness," Vico decides that he must deprive himself of all book knowledge, thus reducing himself "to a state of the most extreme ignorance of all erudition, human and divine" (*FNS*: §40). Vico, and we as his readers, must act as if philosophers and philologists had never existed or, as he puts it in the *Third New Science*, published in 1744, "as if there were no books in the world" (§330). The parallel to Descartes's rejection of book learning is obvious. According to Vico, if we eliminate prior knowledge and "preconceptions," a single light shines in the gloom: "in this vast ocean of doubt, there appears this one isle upon which we may stand firm" (*FNS*: §40). The one remaining truth is that "the world of gentile nations was certainly made by men" (*FNS*: §40). Descartes's *Discourse* leads ineluctably to "I am thinking, therefore I exist." Book I of the *First New Science* culminates in Vico's own axiom.⁷ The axiom resolves the difficulty that had plagued Vico before he discovered the new science, the difficulty that is referred to in Book I's title: "The necessity of the end and the difficulty of the means of discovering a new science" (*FNS*: 7).

The subsequent editions of the *New Science* do not contain a detailed account of Vico's difficulty. The later editions do, however, discuss the obscurities of the two branches of erudition, philosophy and philology. Particularly deleterious, asserts Vico, is when philosophy and philology are pursued in isolation from one another. This leads to two varieties of partial cognitive blindness. Philosophy without philology results in the "conceit of the scholars" (which we might today call logocentrism); philology without philosophy, in the "conceit of the nations" (which we might today call ethnocentrism) (§330).⁸ The former arises from a fixation on the universal and an ignorance of empirical and historical data; the latter,

from a fixation on particulars and an ignorance of universals. Only the light of a philosophically informed philology or a philologically informed philosophy can illuminate the path that leads us beyond the conceits. We can't see this light, however, until we set aside all the books written by philologists and philosophers. Compared with the *First New Science*, the third edition offers a more general formulation of Vico's axiom, which is again described as a light shining in the darkness:

But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men . . .

(§331)

The axiom, as it does in the first edition, occupies a highly effective place in the overall composition of the *Third New Science*. The Vichian counterpart to the Cartesian *cogito* appears near the end of Book I after the chronological table and the list of axioms. And as in the first edition, Vico then turns to the description of the civil world (*mondo civile*), a description he now calls "poetic wisdom."

Renato provides the paradigm for Vico's narration of the path to true knowledge, not only in the *Autobiography*, which takes direct aim at Descartes's *Discourse*, but also in the *New Science* itself. Like Descartes, whom Vico reproaches for disdaining divine and human erudition, Vico must first emancipate himself from book learning in order to advance toward certainty. Forgetting all scholarly knowledge is no easy thing and requires, as Vico notes, "the most violent of efforts" (*FNS*: §40). In the *First New Science*, he compares it with the violent relapse of Noah's offspring into bestiality. According to Vico's continuation of the biblical story, the antediluvian descendants of Ham and Japheth abandon their God-given humanity and "disperse in a ferine wandering through the great forest of the earth" (*FNS*: §40). They subsequently forget the Adamic language and the religion of the true God and must reinvent human customs and language on their own (though in accordance with divine providence). In this way, Vico compares the path his thoughts must take with the history of the beginnings of human culture. At the same time, he adumbrates how he intends to refill his erudition-drained mind. Like the antediluvian human animals, the *bestioni*, who rediscover their humanity by creating the civil world, Vico's empty mind replenishes itself with data drawn from the civil world. Renato erases everything from the mind's slate until only the slate itself remains as the one certain truth, the *cogito* and the idea of God innate in the *cogitatio*. Giambattista covers the slate with writing again after discovering in the darkness of doubt the one truth that can be inscribed on the slate with certainty: the civil world.

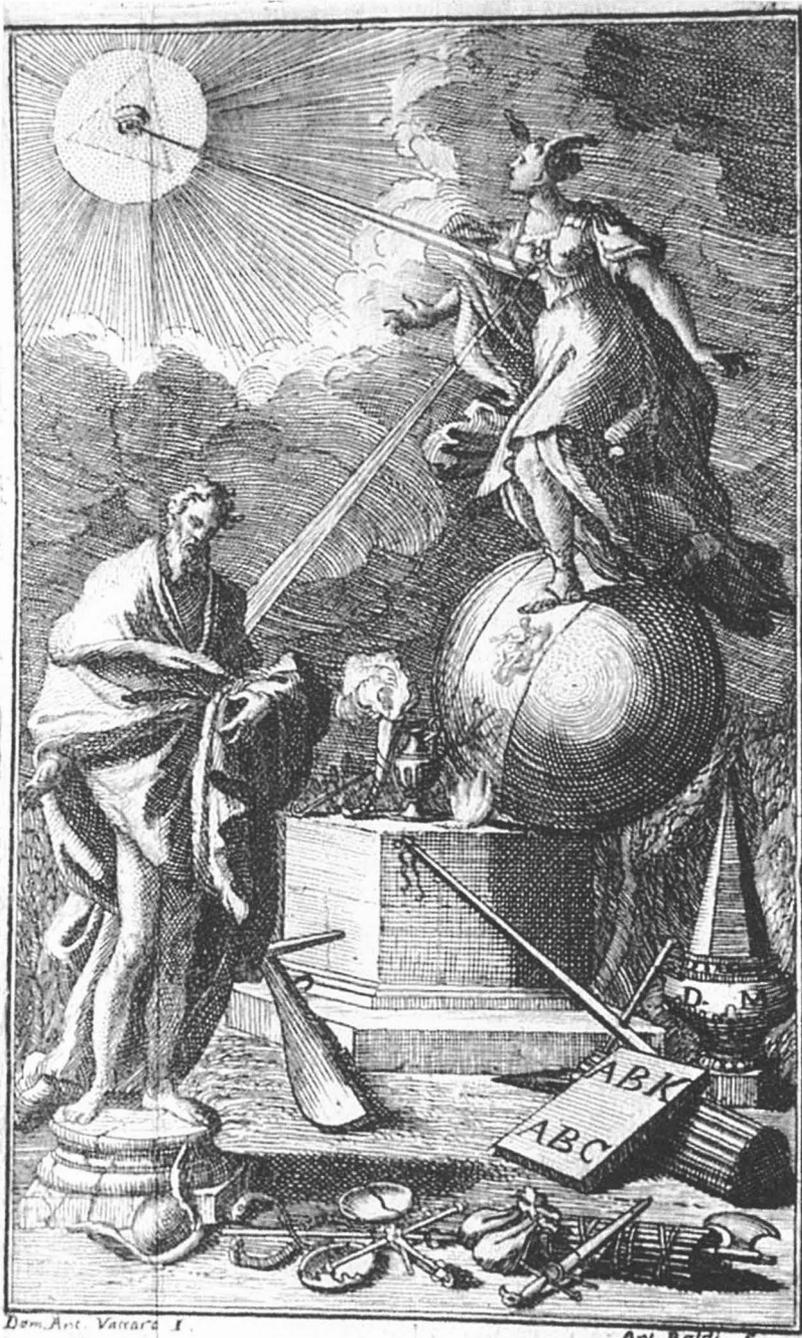
As the first sentence of the *Autobiography* makes clear, it is philology that Vico will write on the slate. For Vico, philology constitutes humanity's entire store of historical, cultural, or "poetic" knowledge. It is "the doctrine of all the institutions that depend on human choice; for example, all histories of the languages, customs, and deeds of peoples in war and peace" (§7). Vico draws his own intellectual portrait by sketching in his name, his city, his era, his parents, his teachers' names, the books he read, and the people with whom he spoke and corresponded. In a similar fashion, he paints a picture of the human mind using the colors of humanity's cultural tradition. In the *New Science*, Vico thus counters Descartes's blank slate with his own table of civil institutions, the allegorical picture of the human spirit from the frontispiece to the 1744 edition without which no book on Vico is complete.

It is the image of a philosophy whose point of reference is no longer the natural world, but the civil world: mankind's social and cultural artifacts. Philology is the science entrusted with the care and study of these artifacts. This is why Vico's heroes are Plato, Tacitus, Bacon, and Grotius. They are his four authors—that is, his authorities and intellectual fathers—because they combined philosophy and philology (in Vico's sense of the term). In the following passage, which culminates in a paean to Grotius, Vico summarizes their respective achievements:

For Plato adorns rather than confirms his esoteric wisdom with the common wisdom of Homer. Tacitus intersperses his metaphysics, ethics and politics with the facts, as they have come down to him from the times, scattered and confused and without system. Bacon sees that the sum of human and divine knowledge of his time needs supplementing and emending, but as far as laws are concerned he does not succeed with his canons in compassing the universe of cities and the course of all times, or the extent of all nations. Grotius, however, embraces in a system of universal law the whole of philosophy and philology, including both parts of the latter, the history on the one hand of facts and events, both fabulous and real, and on the other of the three languages, Hebrew, Greek and Latin; that is to say, the three learned languages of antiquity that have been handed down to us by the Christian religion.

(A: 154–5)

At stake in this overview is the relationship of esoteric wisdom (metaphysics) to common wisdom (*sapienza volgare*: laws, fables, languages, and the chaotic historical facts of all ages and nations). At stake, in other words, is the relationship of philosophy to philology. Vico's new science of the civil world does not concern itself with philology as such (that is, with



The allegorical picture that served as the frontispiece to the *New Science*

discrete historical facts), but rather with the universal and eternal substrate of historical instantiations. Vico sets out to consider the world of nations “in its eternal idea” (§163). Hence, the notion of what constitutes scientific inquiry has not changed. Indeed, Vico aligns himself with the Aristotelian tradition and embraces its credo from the Latin translation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*: “science has to do with what is universal and eternal (*scientia debet esse de universalibus et aeternis*)” (§163). Vico, however, identifies a different domain in which what is universal and eternal can be found. Philosophy has traditionally searched for universals in the realm of nature and has considered the civil world unsuited to scientific study. Vico contends that philosophy has been searching in the wrong place:

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

(§331)

It is Descartes who repeatedly rejects all that Vico would term philological—politics and culture, and indeed the civil world—as improper objects of scientific study. According to Descartes, one obeys a country’s laws and customs as an ethical expedient. Neither truth nor scientific knowledge, though, is to be found in the realm of customs.⁹ For Descartes, there exists a sharp contrast between science and history. In the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, he warns against what Vico would call a philological reading of the ancients:

And even though we have read all the arguments of Plato and Aristotle, we shall never become philosophers if we are unable to make a sound judgement on matters which come up for discussion; in this case what we would seem to have learnt would not be science but history.

(D: 13)

In his search for irrefragable knowledge, Renato marks off the civil world, which includes books and letters, as uncertain terrain. Vico naturally cannot bear to see philology excluded and criticizes the *Discourse*, since in it Renato “disapproves the study of languages, orators, historians, and poets” (A: 137). To understand Vico’s position better, we must first take a closer look at Renato’s disapprobation of philology and his theory of language.

Renato, letters, and language

The *Discourse* is a philosophical autobiography that narrates Descartes's search for and subsequent discovery of clear and certain knowledge. It recounts its author's intellectual development, which, as we have already seen, begins with books, proceeds to experience, and arrives at the thinking self. Letters are Descartes's first source of knowledge:

From my childhood I have been nourished upon letters, and because I was persuaded that by their means one could acquire clear and certain knowledge of all that is useful in life, I was extremely eager to learn them. But as soon as I had completed the course of study at the end of which one is normally admitted to the ranks of the learned, I completely changed my opinion. For I found myself beset by so many doubts and errors that I came to think I had gained nothing from my attempts to become educated but increasing recognition of my ignorance.

(D: 112–13)

Descartes recounts his passage from roseate curiosity to skeptical, erudite ignorance by listing the things he learned in school and then criticizing this knowledge item by item. First he mentions the languages that one needs to know in order to understand ancient books. He then enumerates different kinds of literary texts—fables, stories, good books in general, eloquence, and poetry—and their beneficial effects. Fables “awaken the mind”; histories and the memorable deeds they relate “uplift” the spirit and help “shape one’s judgment”; reading good books is like conversing with the “most distinguished men of past ages”; eloquence has “incomparable powers and beauties”; poetry has “quite ravishing delicacy and sweetness” (D: 113).

Descartes then turns to the sciences. Mathematics is useful both for satisfying one’s curiosity and for solving real-life problems. Ethics offers helpful advice. Philosophy is truculently characterized as giving “the means of speaking plausibly about any subject and winning the admiration of the less learned” (D: 113). Finally, Descartes observes that law, medicine, and other sciences bring honor and wealth to those who pursue them.

This somewhat facetious catalog of the various discourses is followed by a series of caveats. For Descartes considerably circumscribes the ability of these scientific disciplines and discursive worlds to furnish certain knowledge. He begins by noting that he had “already given enough time to languages and likewise to reading the works of the ancients, both their histories and their fables” (D: 113). Yes, concedes Descartes, such texts are entertaining. And to converse with people from other societies and past

ages is useful for relativizing one's own cultural experience (which demonstrates that Descartes, too, is critical of ethnocentrism). The problem is that the journey into the past leaves one ignorant about one's own era. Though history may be useful, there is a danger that those who read it will get lost in the past. As for fables, one might begin to confuse fiction with fact, which is also not exactly helpful for making one's way in the real world. Descartes "valued oratory and was fond of poetry" (D: 114). His fondness for poetry renders even more significant his subsequent assertion that oratory and poetry cannot be learned from books. They are "gifts of the mind rather than fruits of study" (D: 114). People make moving speeches and write beautiful poetry without having studied Quintilian or Horace. Descartes then trots out the traditional dichotomy between the living spirit and dead letters. He declares books to be superfluous; it is inspiration that counts (Descartes's discovery of subjectivity could therefore also be said to mark the beginning of the modern concept of genius).

The young Descartes particularly liked mathematics, "because of the certainty and self-evidence of its reasonings" (D: 114). Yet for Descartes's taste, math remained too narrowly restricted to its technical applications instead of being recognized as the foundation of physics. Ethics, the next discipline mentioned, had always seemed to be built on an unstable foundation. As for theology, Descartes observes that its study had not necessarily led him to revelations that go beyond rational explanations. But it is philosophy, a motley collection of uncertain opinions and fruitless debates, that comes off the worst: "there is still no point in it which is not disputed and hence doubtful" (D: 115). For this reason, Descartes rejects as false that which is merely probable, which includes philosophical opinions. As for medicine and law, Descartes was in a position to disdain these useful sciences since he didn't have to earn a living. Besides, the uncertain foundation of these sciences is not offset by the honor or the profit they bring to their practitioners. Descartes concludes his survey of letters and the several scientific disciplines with the following celebrated passage:

This is why, as soon as I was old enough to emerge from the control of my teachers, I entirely abandoned the study of letters. Resolving to seek no knowledge other than that which could be found in myself or else in the great book of the world, I spent the rest of my youth traveling, visiting courts and armies, mixing with people of diverse temperaments and ranks, gathering various experiences, testing myself in the situations which fortune offered me, and at all times reflecting upon whatever came my way so as to derive some profit from it.

(D: 115)

Young Descartes resolves to give up book learning. As Vico puts it in the *Autobiography*, Descartes deserts his studies; or rather, he trades in his quartos and octavos for the great book of the world (a conventional metaphor, by the way, that remains closely linked to the erudite environment Descartes inhabits).¹⁰ He hopes to learn more truths in the *livre du monde*, since, compared with the reasonings that “some scholar makes in his study about speculative matters,” real-world decisions and actions have immediate and palpable consequences, leaving less room for inconsequential prattle (D: 115). But even real-life experience is ultimately disappointing. For Descartes is confronted with just as many divergent opinions in the real world as he was in philosophy.

Descartes’s encounters with the real world serve merely to call into question some of his preconceived opinions and consequently to make him wary of prejudices. The reader of the book of the world learns that different nations have different customs and that he must, to put it in modern terms, abandon his ethnocentrism. Yet this much is obvious: the great book of the world does not furnish the certain knowledge Descartes had been seeking. Descartes only achieves certainty with his next step, the step back within himself:

But after I had spent some years pursuing these studies in the book of the world and trying to gain some experience, I resolved one day to undertake studies within myself too and to use all the powers of my mind in choosing the paths I should follow. In this I have had much more success, I think, than I would have had if I had never left my country or my books.

(D: 116)

Descartes finds clear and certain knowledge within himself. He finds certainty in the self-certainty of thought: I am thinking, therefore I exist.

With regard to Vico, it is noteworthy that Descartes stages his insight into the certainty of thought as a rejection of book knowledge and the languages that provide access to it. He casts erudition and the languages that preserve it into the sea of doubt. He does the same with the experience he gained in the real world that is likewise referred to as a book. Renatus of the Cards discards it all as mere letters. His wariness about the value of experiences acquired from books and the real world is so extreme that he jettisons all knowledge attended by the slightest doubt, “in order to see if I was left believing anything that was entirely indubitable” (D: 127).

So Descartes resolves “to pretend [*feindre*] that all things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams” (D: 127). As we have seen, Vico refers to this pretense in two ways. On the one hand, Vico himself pretends to erase erudition and preconceptions. Yet on the other, Vico criticizes the rejection of all book knowledge as a

pretentious fiction. Descartes's fiction—his decision to view as false all things that are attended by doubt—leaves him with a single, unshakeable truth: I am thinking, therefore I exist. This is the certainty that Descartes had sought, the statement that is true because it is clear and distinct. It is the gleaming beacon of distinct truth that illuminates Descartes after all of the darkness and uncertainty: "From this I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think, which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist" (D: 127).

The *Discourse*, then, functions something like a multi-cycle washing machine or indeed a brainwash, after which only the pure thinking self, the *res cogitans*, remains. Pure thought has no inscriptions on it; it is a blank slate containing no letters or text symbols. It is to this blank self-certainty that Vico opposes his notion of the certainty of the knowledge we have from the man-made civil world, a knowledge that is composed completely of the graphic symbols, letters, and characters that are written on the mind's slate: the *tavola delle cose civili*.

I would like now to turn to Descartes's concept of language, which, incidentally, has played a considerable role in recent linguistic debates thanks to Noam Chomsky, who made Descartes the starting point of a *legenda aurea* of his own linguistic theory (Chomsky 1966). One happy result of the illegitimacy of Chomsky's claim of Cartesian lineage is that it has spurred linguists' interest in their discipline's origins. Although Vico does not discuss Renato's theory of language *per se*, it is precisely the type of theory that Vico's entire linguistic thought is directed against. With its opposition between body (*res extensa*) and mind (*res cogitans*), Descartes's theory of language is a radicalized version of the Aristotelian conception of language that was as current in the seventeenth century as it is today.¹¹ Instead of Descartes, however, Vico selects Aristotle and Julius Caesar Scaliger as his antagonists in matters of language theory. He could just as easily have aimed his remarks at Renato. According to the traditional reading of Aristotle's *De interpretatione*, cognition and communication are only loosely coupled. In conceiving the material world (*res*), the mind creates mental contents (*conceptus*) by means of a cognitive process that functions identically in all people. The concepts the mind creates are independent of language. To transmit them to others, we denote them with words (*voces*). These denotations are arbitrary (*ad placitum*), as evidenced by the number and variety of human languages.¹² Descartes's remarks in part one of the *Discourse* make it evident that he accepts the traditional view of language as a communicative tool: "I knew that the languages learned [in the Schools] are necessary for understanding the works of the ancients" (D: 113).

No particular cognitive value is attributed to languages, which only grant access to the (ultimately useless) knowledge contained in books. Languages themselves do not constitute knowledge, which is why Descartes considers learning them a waste of time. His position is hardly

novel. Sixteenth-century theorists rejected the humanism of Lorenzo Valla and Juan Luis Vives, which had ascribed an intellectual value to languages and particularly to the semantics of individual languages. In their efforts to legitimize the use of national languages in the higher discourses of science, philosophy, and theology (and thus to emancipate these discursive worlds and their representatives from Latin and the Church), they deployed Aristotelian arguments against what they saw as Platonic humanism. Their linguistic and cultural polemic on behalf of modern national languages and against the special dignity of Latin was based on the Aristotelian theorem that languages are arbitrary: all languages are capable of representing universal concepts and thus are equally suited for literary and learned activity.¹³

This explains why, in part five of the *Discourse*, Descartes only discusses language in general and not individual languages, which are arbitrary anyway. Descartes makes it quite clear that language has one function only: it enables us to “declare our thoughts to others” (D: 140). Descartes’s discussion of language is fully in line with the Aristotelian tradition. Indeed, it is similar to Dante’s remarks in *De vulgari eloquentia* (*Literature in the Vernacular*) and thus part of the Augustinian heritage, as well. Despite what Chomsky says, Descartes’s philosophy by no means signals a shift from a communicative to a cognitive theory of language (Chomsky 1966: 13). The shift Chomsky has in mind is actually a product of the reception of Descartes. It is foreshadowed in Locke’s writings before being systematically developed by Leibniz and, especially, by Etienne Bonnot de Condillac. In Vico’s case, it becomes the foundation for an entire philosophy. For Descartes, language has a communicative function only: because humans are, perhaps regrettably, not purely spiritual but also corporeal beings (*res extensae*), they need language to transmit their thoughts to others.

By exteriorizing thought for the purpose of communication, language inadvertently serves as evidence for thought. Speech provides evidence—Descartes uses the verb *témoigner*—that people are “thinking what they are saying” (D: 140). This is probably what led Chomsky to discern in Descartes’s philosophy a cognitive function for language. For Descartes, however, thought is completely independent of language (and not linked to signs in the way Locke, Leibniz, Condillac, and Vico will propose). The communicative function of language provides evidence that speaking beings are thinking beings. Language indicates that they are not merely *res extensae* but also *res cogitantes*.

Since humans are the only thinking beings (which is itself a conventional notion), language as a material phenomenon is indeed evidence for their humanity. For Descartes, language is the means by which I can determine whether a speaking being I encounter is merely an automaton or a real human being endowed with thought. Long before *Metropolis* or

Terminator, Descartes seems anxious that the speaking beings he meets might be zombies or robots. But there is something that talking automata and animals (like the magpies and parrots Descartes also mentions) can't do. They are incapable of producing "different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer . . . , as the dullest of men can do" (D: 140). Language, then, provides evidence for the ability to arrange words freely in response to an infinite number of situations. It evinces what Chomsky calls creativity. Descartes's notion of creativity, by contrast, is independent of language. It is the creativity of thought.

There is no doubt that language is very important to Descartes from an anthropological perspective as the only material evidence for our thoughts. Moreover, we ought not to forget that Descartes's remarks on language are in part five of the *Discourse*, the section that explains the consequences of his insight into the complete dissimilarity of *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. Part five contains a précis of Descartes's unpublished treatise on natural phenomena and particularly the human body that later appeared in two parts as *The World* and *Treatise on Man*. As evidence for thought provided by the body, language is the mind's only corporeal trace. As the only link between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, language is of great anthropological significance. On the other hand, language's cognitive position is extremely weak, since it is only activated for practical and external purposes; namely, to communicate. For Descartes, thought remains pure and unsullied by language's materiality (to say nothing of its inherently intersubjective or dialogic aspects). As he puts it in part four of the *Discourse*, the *res cogitans* is and remains "entirely distinct from the body" (D: 127). For the theorists who have sought to integrate language and thought, however, language is not merely a trace of thought in the body. It is just as much a trace of the body in thought. Vico, more radical than either Condillac or Leibniz, is doubtless the first thinker to posit the identity of language and thought. It is therefore not until after Descartes that language begins to be conceived as the intermediary between body and mind. In European language philosophy, the opposition of body to mind will not be overcome until Vico states in the *New Science* that "speech stands as it were midway between mind and body" (§1045).

It now becomes evident why the classical languages Descartes had to learn were merely useful tools that granted him access to the knowledge contained in books and why for Descartes language does not contribute to cognition. This view, by the way, contrasts with that of Renaissance Humanism, which seemed somewhat willing to ascribe such a role to language, at least to classical and sacred languages. Part five of the *Discourse* suggests that language is nothing more than a means to communicate. It may provide evidence for the existence of our thoughts but is not itself thought. If this is so, then linguistic diversity only amounts to irksome "dif-

ferences . . . of sounds,” as Wilhelm von Humboldt puts it (Humboldt 1997: 18). Vico’s sematological turn in epistemology marks a break with Aristotelian theories of language that substantially widen the traditional functional distinction between cognition and communication by creating an abyss between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.

Descartes’s remarks in his 1629 letter to Marin Mersenne on the possibility of a universal philosophical language represent what is probably the best-known linguistic motif in his philosophy. Here, too, Descartes speaks less than enthusiastically about natural languages, which contain practically nothing but confusing meanings and thus distort the truth. So it would indeed be advantageous if “true philosophy” could sort out these confused ideas and construct a language with clear and distinct ones. Descartes considers such an outcome extremely unlikely, however. Such a language, he suspects, would only be possible in a new paradise (Descartes 1964–74, vol. 1: 82). His skepticism will be forgotten, though, and later in the seventeenth century the likes of George Dalgarno and John Wilkins will optimistically take up the cause of constructing a universal language to serve as a new Adamic language.¹⁴

It is appropriate at this juncture to bring up the idea of a universal or philosophical language, since Vico’s notion of the common mental dictionary (*dizionario mentale commune*), is often equated with it.¹⁵ As I shall suggest in Chapter 4, however, Vico’s dictionary belongs to the Adamic language tradition and at the same time distances itself from this Enlightenment project. It sets itself apart from the dream of reconstructing Adamic language by being a pagan alternative to the biblical paradigm. Vico’s dictionary seeks to reconstruct humanity’s origins (not to construct a future language) and to find the unity that lies hidden in diversity (and not the uniqueness of the language of the Garden of Eden). It is consequently closer to the reconstructions of nineteenth-century historical linguistics than to seventeenth-century attempts to construct a universal language.

Signs and the *verum-factum* principle

As we have seen, the Cartesian critique of language views linguistic diversity as merely irksome and superfluous. It decries the knowledge contained in books (and transmitted through language) as unclear and uncertain. And, somewhat unwillingly, it concedes that language is the only indicator of our humanity as *res cogitantes*.

Like Descartes, Vico gets lost in the dark forest of human erudition. Like Descartes, he despairs and deserts his studies. But unlike Descartes, who studies the book of the world and finally withdraws into himself, Vico returns to the dark forest of erudition holding aloft the light of certainty that the entire civil world is made by human beings and, consequently,

that the world of culture preserved in books and signs is a source of certain knowledge. Vico does not derive certainty from the certainty of thought. And though he does not seek it in the certainty of the natural scientist's experiment, he is closer to belonging in the empiricist than in the Cartesian camp. For Vico derives certain knowledge from experience—from the experience of making the cultural world.

When we do something ourselves, our source of certainty is similar to that of the craftsman who makes things by hand. For if I have made something with my own hands, I know how it came to be the way it is. For this reason, God, the Maker of all things, is the only one who knows how everything came to be. Philosophers have accorded mathematical objects the certainty of the craftsman: since mathematical constructs are made by humans, humans can have true knowledge of them. In Vico's second book, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language*, he, too, restricts the application of his epistemological principle—"verum (the true) and factum (what is made) are interchangeable"—to mathematical objects (Vico 1988b: 45). Vico's subsequent innovation is to take this traditional epistemological maxim and apply it to the civil world.¹⁶ Of course, the maxim continues to apply to mathematical constructs, and indeed mathematics supplies the model for Vico's new science:

Now, as geometry, when it constructs the world of quantity out of its elements . . . is creating it for itself, just so does our Science . . . , but with a reality greater by just so much as the institutions having to do with human affairs are more real than points, lines, surfaces, and figures.

(§349)

As Karl Löwith has shown, Hobbes had already taken the principle of *verum factum convertuntur* from mathematics and applied it to the man-made objects of the civil world: "civil philosophy is demonstrable, because we make the commonwealth ourselves" (quoted in Löwith 1986: 215). The important difference is that in Hobbes's view, the commonwealth is made by humankind's reason and will. For Vico, though, making is related to the passions and to mental faculties that are still corporeal. According to this criterion, humans cannot have certain knowledge of nature—science's traditional domain—because they did not make it themselves. Only God, "the first Maker," can know nature (Vico 1988b: 46).

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant, too, makes use of the *verum-factum* principle. However, Kant is completely in line with the European tradition—the tradition Vico criticizes—of focusing the philosophical gaze on the natural world. Moreover, Kant sees the validation of this principle in scientific experiment, since an experiment makes what it seeks to know.

Natural scientists know objects because they make nature answer their questions. This is the triumphant and familiar path trodden by natural science, the path laid out by Bacon, to whom Kant dedicated the first *Critique*.

They [natural scientists] learned that reason only perceives that which it produces after its own design . . . It is only the principles of reason which can give to concordant phenomena the validity of laws, and it is only when experiment is directed by these rational principles that it can have any real utility.

(Kant 1986: 10)

For Kant, reason is a handmaiden who uses both hands when she wants to grasp something. She applies her principles and experiments to nature and obtains certainty with her own two hands. To seize control of nature by recreating God's creation through experimentation is a boldly modern gesture. This revolutionary turn toward nature, which flashed a "new light" on the human mind, is alien to Vico (Kant 1986: 10). For him, humans can only obtain cognitive certainty about that which they have made themselves; namely, culture.

That the civil world, in contradistinction to the natural world, was certainly made by men is the light Vico sees shining in the darkness of the forest of erudition, the light that enables him to collect and rearrange the human and divine erudition that he initially had to set aside. Vico does not discard books and letters, nor does he clear-cut or abandon the forest. He sifts through it.

The master key (*chiave maestra*) of Vico's new science, the tool that will enable him to illuminate and critically sift through the dark forest of erudition, is the insight that the first humans were poets, makers, and authors (*auctores*) of poetic characters. It is the insight that in making the civil world, humans make signs.¹⁷ Vico's new science is the science of the ancient signs made by the primitive makers-poets-authors and later preserved in books. For him, philosophical certainty is sedimented in the deeper strata of the poetic characters, in the writing and letters Renato disdains. In Vico's works, the terms "author" and "poet" can mean both the founder or maker and the scribe or bard. The authors of the nations are simultaneously the founders of societies and the scribes who discover the first mythical signs. The poets are the makers of the civil world and the creators of language. The following passage from Vico's *Autobiography* underscores this intentional ambiguity and summarizes the fundamental principle of his new science:

For [Mr. Vico] discovers this new science by means of a new critical method for sifting the truth as to the founders [*autori*] of the

[gentile] nations from the popular traditions of the nations they founded. Whereas the writers to whose works criticism is usually applied came thousands of years after these founders.

(A: 167)

The *First New Science* is organized in such a way as to make evident that the popular traditions of the nations—the world of the gentile nations that Vico will later call the civil world—are, like signs, entities with two sides: a signifier and a signified. In Book II of this edition, the world made by humans is examined in terms of ideas (*per l'idee*); in Book III, it is studied in terms of the languages that are the ideas' signifiers (*per la parte delle lingue*). In the subsequent editions of the *New Science*, though, Vico no longer describes the civil world first as an idea and then as language. For in the meantime Vico has realized that it is precisely the semiotic quality of the civil world that makes it impossible to discuss ideas and language separately. This is because they are “by nature united,” as he puts it in the *Autobiography's* critique of the *First New Science* (A: 194). In other words, Vico now recognizes that signifiers (language) and signifieds (ideas) form an indivisible entity. To deal with them separately would amount to more than just the organizational error he committed in the first edition.

Vico's inquiry into the conditions of possibility of certain knowledge amounts to a transcendental semiotics that I call a sematology in reference to the Homeric *sēmata*. The Vico literature tends to stop short at the first part of Vico's response to Descartes's inquiry into clear and distinct knowledge: namely, that the civil world is the domain of certain knowledge because it is made by humans. Vico scholars repeatedly stress that he counters the metaphysics of European natural science with the metapolitics of the *New Science*. But Vico knows that Obbesio, as he calls Hobbes, had already pointed to the certain knowledge humans can have of the commonwealth. He is equally aware that he takes a further decisive step that takes him beyond Obbesio's insight. For Vico's civil world is not based on Hobbes's rational “creation of a body politic by *arbitrary institution*” (quoted in Löwith 1986: 215), but rather on the imaginative creativity of poets who speak in poetic characters. From both a political and a semiotic perspective, Vico sets the poets' imagination in opposition to Hobbes's arbitrary institution. Consequently, Vico's true discoveries are poetic ur-signs and imaginative ur-semiosis. His real insight is that metapolitics is simultaneously metasemiology: “We find that the principle of these origins both of languages and of letters lies in the fact that the first gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters” (§34).

He calls this principle his discovery (*discoverta*). We should take Vico's own assessment of his scientific achievement seriously—in part because he reenacts it often and with great relish. He invariably introduces his discov-

ery by referring to the years of sedulous effort it cost him. In the *First New Science*, he writes that after a “continuous and severe meditation that has occupied [him] for twenty-five years,” he finally discovers the first principle of his science, a principle that is comparable to the elements of grammar and geometry (*FNS*: §261).¹⁸ Vico gives himself an impressive intellectual lineage. He sees himself as the third great discoverer of elements (*stoikheia*), following Cadmos, the fabulous discoverer of letters (*grammata*), and Euclid, the discoverer of the elements of geometry. In the *Autobiography*, Vico says of the *Second New Science*: “In this work [Vico] finally discovers in its full extent that principle which in his previous works he has as yet understood only in a confused and indistinct way” (*A*: 166). In the *Third New Science*, he writes: “This discovery, which is the master key of this Science, has cost us the persistent research of almost all our literary life” (§34).

Just how far Vico has distanced himself from Descartes becomes apparent only in light of the *Third New Science*'s first principle and master key. Vico not only finds certain knowledge in the man-made civil world instead of in the pure thinking subject. His unique insight is that he views the man-made civil world as a world of poetic characters; in other words, as a world of a certain type of sign or language. Nothing could be more opposed to Renato, who disapproves of language in all its concrete forms: as individual statements, as discursive universes, and as natural languages. Renato only recognizes language at a universal level as evidence for the existence of the thinking subject. For Descartes and the Aristotelian tradition, language is not essential to thought because it is only arbitrarily linked to thought for the purpose of communication. Thought itself is independent of language. For Vico, by contrast, thought is a sort of speech. More precisely and in modern terms: thought is semiosis.

Language has a completely different systematic significance in Vico's work, which leads to a marked transformation of Descartes's radicalized theory of two substances. Vico, too, is familiar with the Augustinian separation of body and mind and with the latter's concomitant superiority over the former, a notion that is fundamental to the Christian heritage. Its influence can be seen, for example, in Vico's description of human development as a movement from corporeality to ever-greater spirituality. But Vico's sematological insight ensures that language and signs are inscribed into this dualism from the very beginning. In a certain way, it is the sign that first makes the dualism possible. The master key, which was in part so hard for Vico to discover because the entire European intellectual tradition stood in his way, posits that the first human thought was a semiotic entity in which idea and material signifier were not yet separated. It was not an unspoken idea that was subsequently marked with a signifier for the purpose of communication. In the beginning, the mind at work inside the poets could hardly be differentiated from the body. The mental

power that created the poetic characters—*memoria-fantasia-ingegno*—was still entirely corporeal. And its creation, the poetic sign, was a corporeal-mental entity. It is only later that the mind emancipates itself from poetic characters. Semiosis becomes increasing intellectual, a process that manifests itself in the progressive separation of the idea from the signifier and of the mind from the body. Standing at the end of this developmental process, the conventional sign strives for arbitrariness and rationality even though, since it is bound to the body, it can never fully achieve them. The traditional dualism between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* is thus both created by the sign and always mediated by it. Vico encapsulates his sematological transformation of Cartesian dualism in the brief statement at the conclusion of Book IV of the *Third New Science*: “speech stands as it were midway between mind and body” (§1045). Vico replaces the dualism with a triad consisting of body, mind, and language. This anthropological principle states that “a man is properly only mind, body, and speech” (§1045).

Vico’s discovery is the first linguistic turn in the history of philosophy. Condillac’s *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines* (*Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*), which also systematically incorporates signs into humans’ cognitive development, does not appear until 1746 and is not nearly as radically semiotic as Vico’s *New Science*. Humboldt inaugurates the second linguistic turn. The one that is frequently discussed today (Rorty 1992) is actually the third (and only an original achievement for those who have not yet noticed that speech is midway between mind and body). Vico’s discovery is the linguistic turn of Cartesian philosophy. To the *res extensa* and *res cogitans* it adds a third substance, a *res linguistica*, that mediates between them. The rest of this book is devoted to describing more exactly this third substance.

This much is clear: *favella*, *lingua*, *parlare* (as far as I can tell, Vico uses them synonymously) are not so much speech in the sense of articulate sound production as they are semiosis in the broader, modern sense. In contrast to the traditional conception of language as an arbitrary sign, Vico makes, as Humboldt later will, *favella* part of thought. But unlike Humboldt, Vico does not maintain that thought is dependent on the different sounds and words of the various historical languages. Lurking beneath the civilized world’s rational and apparently arbitrary spoken languages is something wild and fantastic, corporeal and visual. Under *logos* Vico discovers *mythos*. Scratch the surface of what appear to be conventional spoken words (*voci*) and you find imaginative, sensual, wild, and figural semiosis. Deconstruct ordinary language and you find thought in the form of poetic characters: *sēmata*.

Vico’s linguistic turn of Cartesian philosophy is thus more precisely a sematological turn. And that is also its limitation.¹⁹ Humboldt, on the other hand, inaugurates a linguistic turn of Kantian philosophy that is dialogic and based on individual, historical languages. Our century’s linguis-

tic turn, finally, is a pragmatic and communicative turn of logical positivism's semantic orientation. In a certain way, the three turns together provide a complete picture of thought's dependence on language. Vico integrates imagination and figuration into semiosis; Humboldt integrates the semantics particular to individual languages as well as dialogicity; and Wittgenstein integrates the pragmatic aspect of language games into epistemology.

VICO'S DISCOVERY

Poetic characters

The discovery that cost Vico twenty-five years of diligence is that “the first gentile peoples . . . were poets who spoke in poetic characters” (§34) or, in the words of the *First New Science*, that “poetic characters are found to have been the elements of the languages in which the first gentile nations spoke” (*FNS*: §261). As already noted, I take Vico’s assessment of his achievement seriously and make his discovery the starting point for my own reading. For to say that the first gentile peoples spoke in poetic characters is nothing less than to discover the fundamental semioticity of human thought.

The first nations

Who were the first nations? In answering this question it is important to remember that Vico means only the first *gentile* nations. For Vico, the Bible is the incontestable source of information on Jewish and Christian history, which therefore requires no further explanation. According to his continuation of the biblical story, the gentile nations are descendants of Noah’s children and thus part of divine creation. They constitute a branch of the human race that, following the Flood, loses its God-given humanity and descends into bestiality. Over time, these animal-men (*bestioni*) regain their humanity. The gentile nations are their own creators. Isolating gentile history from Judeo-Christian history gives Vico the freedom he needs to ponder the origins of humanity without questioning the authority of the Bible or the Church. The gentile nations Vico has in mind—and whose primitive myths, languages, and signs he refers to—are primarily the Greeks and the Romans (whose legacy, of course, the Christian world continued). Vico also mentions the Chinese, Chaldaens, Egyptians, Phoenecians, Asians, Persians, Scythians, Germans, and Native Americans (whom he calls *los patacones* after the fashion of Spanish accounts of the voyages of discovery), who are important in that they furnish evidence for the universality of the origin of signs or, as I call it, sematogenesis. Vico refers repeatedly to these ur-peoples in order to show that his interpreta-

tion not only applies to the primitive history of classical antiquity but also to other primitive periods and continents.

How long did the beginning last? The question already implies that there are reasons to assume that the poetic first peoples are not just the animal-men of the very first phase of human history. Vico identifies three discrete stages in the gentile peoples' political and linguistic development. The humanization process, the reawakening of the postdiluvian animal-men to their humanity, begins with the age of the gods, which is succeeded by the age of heroes and, finally, the age of men. From a political and institutional point of view, these three ages correspond (1) to the formation of theocratic hordes, clans, or families; (2) to aristocratic and oligarchic caste societies led by heroes; and (3) to democratic or monarchic states. To each of the three forms of political organization corresponds a particular type of language, which Vico likewise refers to as divine, heroic, and human. The signifiers of the first language are gestures (*atti, cenni*) and objects (*corpi*). The second language's signifiers are heroic emblems (*imprese eroiche*), the heraldic symbols that Vico also characterizes as images, similes, comparisons, and natural properties. It is not until the third language that signifiers are words (*voci*). As the enumeration of language types already makes evident, not only the gestures and objects of the first language, but also the heroic signs of the second language must be poetic. Indeed, the latter more readily correspond to what would ordinarily be defined as poetic signs, since Vico also describes them as similes, comparisons, and metaphors. For Vico, the metaphor is not merely a poetic figure, it is the poetic sign par excellence. He calls it the "most luminous and therefore the most necessary and frequent" (§404). This is why he explicitly defines the language of the second age as "poetic locution" (*locuzion poetica*) in contrast to the "natural speech" (*favella naturale*) of the first age: "This natural speech was succeeded by the poetic locution of images, similes, comparisons, and natural properties" (§227). It will become clear from the *New Science's* argumentative structure—but above all from its examples—that the heroic signs of poetic locution are at the center of Vico's investigation. But this does not mean that natural speech was not poetic, too. The fundamental mechanism of natural speech is also poetic and metaphorical; namely, the transfer (*transporto*) of spirit to physical objects (*corpi*). The divine gestures and objects of the earliest age are just as much poetic characters as the heroic emblems of the second.

It has often been noted that Vico does not clearly distinguish the first age from the second and that he privileges the latter. The same is said of the first two languages. Only the third, human age and human language are thought to be clearly distinguishable from the first two pairs. For it is not until the third age, in contrast to the naturalness and imaginativeness of the first two poetic ages, that conventionality and rationality seem to

hold sway and that poetry is reduced to prose. Vico's first peoples, the poets of the origin, are thus not only the animal-men of the first age's theocratic hordes. They are also—indeed, primarily—the aristocratic makers of images, similes, comparisons, and natural properties of the second age: the heroic creators of the *sēmata*.

Poets

In Vico's usage, "poets" (*poeti*) connotes its etymon, the Greek word *poiētēs*, which means maker or creator in a more general sense. Vico states explicitly that "'poets' . . . is Greek for 'creators [*criatori*]" (§376). I have already pointed out that Vico's poets at first do not create language at all, but rather other, primarily visual signs. Poetic characters are objects, gestures, and heroic emblems, not words, phonetic signs, or "voices" (*voci*). In the beginning, there is at most a trace of or precursor to phonetic speech; namely, song. Vico's poets are really interpreters, dancers, sculptors, and painters. They are only to a limited degree singers of wordless songs. They express and interpret natural objects and phenomena by giving them a soul. Stones are spirits, trees are nymphs, lightning is Jove. The poets dance what they wish to express by moving their bodies. They adorn shields and crests with symbols, much the way Proetus scratched murderous signs (*sēmata lygra*) in a folded tablet. They produce something that has meaning: signs or *sēmata*. But their signs are not yet words. Vico's poets are thus artists who create signs: sematurges. They are not poets in the more narrow sense of artists who use language to create texts.

Speech

By expressing (*significare*) something, the poets transmit meaning to others, and to this extent they are also speaking (*parlare*). It is in this very general sense that Vico uses the verb *parlare*. It does not mean to speak using words, but more generally to communicate or transmit signs to someone. The expression *parlare* leaves open what kind of signs are being communicated. This is what enables Vico to employ locutions like "to speak by writing [*parlare scrivendo*]" (§429) and "to speak by singing [*parlare cantando*]" (§462). The second term in each pair identifies the medium used for a communication, which *parlare* by itself leaves unspecified. We might say that *parlare* is the exteriorization of signification and that signification is the sign's reference to the interior—namely, the idea. By marking an idea with a material signifier (a gesture, an object, or a heroic emblem), the poet enables others to perceive the idea, and, in this sense, the poet "speaks." It is important to note that the term *parlare* describes a process that includes those who perceive the poet's signifying activity. *Parlare* refers to the pragmatic and communicative dimension of

semiosis, whereas *significare* refers to its semantic and cognitive dimension; that is, to the signifier's relation to the signified.

Nevertheless, it is signification—"the ideas they wished to express [*significare*]" (§32)—that is at the forefront of Vico's sign theory, not communication, though communication is always signification's concomitant. To put it another way, the primary function of the *sēmata* is to accomplish what Habermas has called "world-disclosure," a function that is, however, always intended for other people and is thus political or "civil," as Vico would say (Habermas 1987: 205).

The general meaning of the term *parlare* coincides with Vico's usage of the word *lingua* (language). In certain specific contexts, *lingua* can refer to human speech, especially where Vico contrasts speech with letters (*lettere*). When Vico refers to the twin birth of languages and letters at §33, *lingua* refers to speech as opposed to writing. But often, probably in most cases, *lingua* refers to an ensemble of signs whose material characteristics are left unspecified. Consequently, when Vico speaks at §32 of the three languages that correspond to the three stages of human development, he is not, for the most part, referring to spoken languages but to signs with a range of material and structural characteristics. Only the last of the three languages consists of words.

A particularly revealing example of Vico's catholic use of the word *lingua* is the locution *lingua armata* from the *First New Science*. This "language of arms" comprises the images on coats of arms, coins, and heroes' shields as well as military communiqués consisting of objects (*FNS*: §342). Vico's favorite example of the language of arms, one he cites repeatedly in the *Third New Science*, is the message the Scythian King Idanthysus sent to Darius. Idanthysus replied to a bellicose message from Darius by sending him a frog, a mouse, a bird, a plowshare, and a bow (*FNS*: §§319–24). A language consisting of physical objects can hardly be considered a vocal language.

In modern semiotic terms, we could say that Vico's term *lingua* corresponds fairly closely to what Umberto Eco would call a code (Eco 1984: 164–88). This is also true in the sense that such signs constitute entire messages and not parts of messages. We could just as well apply the term "semiosis" to what Vico describes as *parlare*. Because Vico adopts the vocabulary of the traditional European discourse on language, it is sometimes difficult to grasp the novelty of his theory. Vico's terminology obstructs our access to his insights, which are ultimately more semiotic than linguistic.

Character

First, as with Vico's use of the word "poets," it is important to keep in mind the Greek etymons of Vico's term "character." A *kharax* is a sharp

pole; the verb *kharassein* means to engrave, scratch, or stamp; and a *kharagma* is a print or a stamp. Consequently, a character is a tool for engraving or stamping as well as something that is engraved or stamped, such as a coin. It is both the stamp and the image left by the stamp. For Vico, however, a character is primarily something engraved or stamped by the poets and less something that leaves an impression on the poets. But regardless of who or what does the stamping, there is, in modern terms, an iconic relationship between the object doing the stamping and the object that is stamped. In other words, the character (the material signifier: the *sēma*) conforms with the signified.

Second, the stamp and the image left by the stamp are visible or palpable. Characters can be seen and felt but not heard. The poetic characters of early humans are thus manifestly visual and haptic entities. In the beginning, semiosis is an optocentric and chirocentric activity that concerns the eye and the hand, not the mouth and the ear.

Third, the Greek verb *kharassein*, like *scribere* and *graphein*, the other Latin and Greek verbs for writing, reminds us of writing's similarity to engraving. Characters are also *grammata*: written signs and letters. This becomes evident when Vico introduces poetic characters in the passage from the *First New Science* quoted above. He groups them with other characters and consequently with other graphic elements and other graphic ur-forms: the letters of the alphabet and the basic geometrical figures:

For, just as the letter "a," ... is a grammatical character ... or ... the triangle is a geometrical character ..., so the poetic characters are found to have been the elements of the languages in which the first gentile nations spoke.

(FNS: §261)

Such characters are obviously written or drawn, which puts poetic characters in the class of graphic entities. With regard to the materiality of sematogenesis, Vico's statement that the first peoples were poets is of a piece with his now hardly surprising or contradictory assertion that "all nations began to speak by writing" (§429). Primitive poets were "graphic" artists and drawers of poetic graphics.

Philosophers have always liked to portray thinking as a sort of writing on the mind's slate. Philosophers are, after all, writers by trade, Plato's polemic in *Phaedrus* against professional writers notwithstanding. In antiquity, the mind was construed as a wax tablet onto which ideas were scratched like *kharaktēres* or *typoi*. In the first chapter, we saw how Descartes erased the letters so that only the tablet or slate remained. Yet because Descartes had left one idea on the slate—the innate idea of God—Locke had to erase it all over again. Locke's figurative writing surface is no longer a tablet but a piece of paper. For Locke, human

beings write their own ideas on the paper, ideas that come from experience. In fact, Locke draws a parallel between ideas and written signs: "Let us suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper void of all characters, without any *ideas*" (Locke 1964: 77).

The graphic quality of poetic characters is not contradicted by the fact that Vico at first seems to gainsay the materiality of primordial signs. Vico defines poetic characters as "mental language [*nacque mentale*]" (§401), as "ideas," "forms," and "models" (§429). But even these immaterial ideas and forms are visual in so far as they are mental images. The Greek *eidos* means "sight," and *eidea* is first and foremost the visual appearance of something (and is linked etymologically to the Latin verb *videre*). Vico's locution "ideal portraits [*ritratti ideali*]" underscores the visual quality of primitive semiosis (§209). Moreover, Vico's reference to the mental nature of the first signs does not stress the poetic characters' immateriality so much as their muteness.

Because the first signs are the physical objects themselves (*corpi*), they are corporeal or corpulent (*corpolento*). Vico also calls them "real words [*parole reali*]" (§435). Nevertheless, their creation is in fact a purely mental activity, since it is "merely" the projection of the senses or the soul into the physical objects themselves and not the creation of something new. The creation of material signifiers does not begin until the poet's body begins to dance and his gestures actually "write" the idea that he had earlier only mentally inscribed onto physical objects.

Finally, the poetic characters of the origin are also characters, the figures of a story or myth as well as the archetypes of a certain kind of action or behavior. Since Theophrast, such characters have been known in the European tradition as *ethikoi kharaktēres*. La Bruyère gave the word new currency in 1688 with his book *Les Caractères*. Whenever Vico introduces the term "poetic characters," he explains it in just this way by referring to the "persons of the comedies," who embody the "ideas of the various human types" (§34). Accordingly, Hercules is the character of the founder of humanity and the original father of human society. He is the first character Vico mentions in the *Third New Science*, since he is the archetype of the "political hero" (§3). Jove is the archetype of godliness, an archetype that subsequently unfolds into the entire range of divine characters. Orpheus is the character of the primordial poet whose songs tame the animals and who, as such, is the Greek nation's poetic father. Achilles is the character of the youthful hero whose rights, in a prelegal age, are based on his martial prowess. Hence, the first signs—the *sēmata* of the first poetic peoples—are primarily concrete, personified ideas that predate abstract concepts.

Imaginative universals

For this reason, poetic characters are further defined as imaginative genera (*generi fantastici*) or imaginative universals (*universali fantastici*). The adjective *fantastico* refers to the imaginative capacity from which the poetic characters arise and means something like “created by the imagination.” “Imaginative universal” sounds like an oxymoron, since universals are usually abstract concepts created by reason. For Vico the imagination does not actually create universal concepts, but rather the particular, individual, and concrete ideas of primitive thought, as exemplified by the poetic characters. Hercules is not an abstract concept; he is a concrete figure. The key point, though, is that the individualized characters of this early stage of thought have the universal validity usually reserved for abstract concepts. For Vico, the universality of these concrete concepts is demonstrated by the fact that poetic characters exist among all nations and are in essence identical.

For example, all nations have a Hercules myth about a great and powerful man who bends nature to his will by taming lions, slaying dragons, or clearing forests and in whom they see the founder of human society. Thus, the poetic character Hercules appears in the plural from the beginning of the *Third New Science*. “Hence the founders of the first gentile nations above mentioned were the Herculese” (§14). Vico announces that Varro counted forty of them. Zoroaster, for example, is the Hercules of the East and appears under several guises in the several eastern nations (§59). The poetic character of the first god, Jove, is referred to in the plural, as well: “by uniformity of ideas among Orientals, Egyptians, Greeks, Latins and other gentile nations, there arose equally the religions of as many Joves” (§9).

The concrete and particular ideas created by the imagination thus have a common core that renders them universally valid. Vico states unambiguously in the *First New Science* that humans exhibit a “uniformity of . . . ideas concerning substance” because they share “identical . . . necessities and utilities” (*FNS*: §387). Owing to their varying natural and social conditions, however, they have “diverse modifications [of mind]” that influence the way they think about universal ideas, with the result that these ideas display a “diversity in properties” (*FNS*: §387).

The universal nature of the poetic characters links Vico's discovery with the project of a new science in the strict sense of a science dependent on reason. Vico's insistence on the universality of the signs created by the imagination is decisive. If poetic characters were only imaginative, they would, in a Baconian system of the sciences organized according to the mental faculty that governs each science, be categorized as poetry and governed by the imagination (and at most administrated by history and memory): “Thus it is clearly manifest that history, poetry, and philosophy

flow from the three distinct fountains of the mind, viz., the memory, the imagination, and the reason" (Bacon 1853: 78). Because Vico adopts the Aristotelian maxim according to which "science has to do with what is universal and eternal" (§163), the poetic characters can only be objects of science by being universal genera governed by reason. The scientificity of Vico's new science stands and falls by his ability to prove the universality of the poetic characters. His new science of ancient signs—his *sematology*—is only really a science to the extent that it is universal and eternal.

It is important to emphasize this point, for it demonstrates that adherents of a hermeneutically informed history of ideas (*Geistesgeschichte*) ought to think twice before claiming Vico as their intellectual forebear. The conception of science that animates the *New Science* is not a theory of the individual. On its own terms, Vico's project is a science in so far as it succeeds in uncovering the universals that underlie historical and empirical data. Like natural science, the era's other "new" science, it takes experience as its starting point. It thus meets modern research standards by being a variety of empirical research, though of the social and not the natural world. And, like natural science, it searches for the universal in empirical instantiations.

This fundamentally distinguishes Vico's new science from subsequent efforts, such as Humboldt's, to grasp individuality as such in human cultural production. Interestingly, Humboldt also uses the term "character." In Humboldtian usage, *Charakter* refers to a hermeneutic construction undertaken by "anthropological" researchers (by which Humboldt means historians or linguists) in an attempt to understand the individuality of the individual.¹ The Vichian poetic character, by contrast, serves merely as a kind of placeholder for the universal; indeed, its individuality is meant to be deconstructed to reveal its universal substrate. The deconstructive bent of Vico's project is to put under erasure particular cultural modifications in order to arrive at humanity's universal ideas. Almost a century later, Humboldt will, at the corresponding systematic locus of his own theory, address the scientific status of descriptions of individuality:

It cannot be denied that, up to a certain point, this individuality can only be sensed, not demonstrated, and one might therefore ask whether all consideration of it should not in fact be excluded from the sphere of the scientific study of language.

(Humboldt 1997: 52–3)

It does not matter whether or not the description of the individual character amounts to science, for Humboldt describes the "desire to attempt" the hermeneutic undertaking as "difficult to resist" (Humboldt 1997: 55). But it is only when Vico is not being scientific—for instance, when he speaks "with the candor proper to a historian" in his *Autobiography*

(A: 113)—that he aims to produce an individual characterization.² Vico's new science is manifestly not an attempt to found a hermeneutic science of the individual.

Vico's notion of the common mental dictionary (*dizionario mentale commune*) refers to this universal core and is therefore an aspect of the scientificity of his sematology. The significant systematic weight of this concept is readily apparent when Vico turns immediately to the common mental dictionary at §35 after having described his discovery, the master key of his science, at §34. For the mental dictionary contains the generic and universal component of the poetic characters created by the imagination. It contains the "one common idea" behind the various Joves (§9). The mental dictionary is the sematological counterpart to the ideal universal history that Vico sees as forming the basis of the various individual histories and that can be reconstructed by studying them.

As concepts, imaginative universals and the ideal universal history might now seem antiquated. In our own day, cultural historians take a historical and hermeneutic approach to studying individual cultural artifacts and don't hesitate to call this activity science. They no longer need to resort to claims of universality and eternalness to legitimize their work. Yet even today, historical and cultural research does not restrict itself to the study of individual phenomena, but also attempts, particularly in its structuralist and scientific guises, to identify underlying regularities and sometimes even to posit universal laws. The tension between historicity and universality has remained, then, a prominent feature of scientific discourse and has in fact spawned some of our era's most interesting research into what Vico would call the civil world. One need only think of C.G. Jung's archetypes or Vladimir Propp's folktale studies: discernible in countless stories are the "eternal" structures of the great ur-stories.

Many contemporary linguists display a markedly universalistic tendency in their research into the linguistic structures that underlie all languages, viewing individual languages as essentially variations on a single theme. In the wake of Chomsky, linguistics has tended to study languages' universal characteristics and has even claimed that these are biologically determined. (This "Cartesian" and innatist position is, of course, opposed to Vico's view of humans as the makers of their intellectual and cultural world.) Yet there are also linguists today who study individual languages, stress the individuality of each language's particular structure, and play down the role of universals. Indeed, some linguistic relativists emphasize languages' individuality to such a degree that they reject practically all linguistic commonality and consider the various languages' respective world-views to be insurmountable hindrances to mutual understanding between speakers of different languages. Both schools, the unreconstructed universalists who negate all difference and the unreconstructed relativists who deny all commonality, are doubtless off the mark.

In view of the foregoing, it would be wrong to assign Vico completely to the universalistic school. For though the imaginative universals are indeed universals, they are also imaginative. Vico belongs to the universalistic and scientific camp to the extent that his research aims to uncover the poetic characters' common universal and eternal core. But because he views the individual historical figure created by the imagination as a valuable contribution to the history of both language and humanity, his theory also represents a step toward bringing the individual into the purview of scientific study. Vico's science is thus not entirely universalistic in the traditional sense, but rather something new in the history of ideas: an attempt to combine the traditional concepts of science, history, and poetry. With regard to the mental faculties that govern these processes, what makes Vico's *New Science* new is its attempt to combine reason, memory, and imagination.

This intermediate epistemological position is also evidenced by the status of Vico's mental dictionary. On the one hand, the notion of a mental dictionary is outmoded. To the extent that it assumes that the underlying ideas are the same among all nations, Vico's mental dictionary is a variation on the Aristotelian theme that all humans have the same ideas (signifieds) and that only the words (the material signifiers) linked to these ideas are diverse and arbitrary. On the other hand, for Vico signifiers are not only materially diverse and arbitrary but also images that contain the individual points of view of these universal ideas. The mental dictionary is more than a compilation of universal ideas. As a deconstruction of the signifiers of the various languages, it is simultaneously a collection of the points of view that the various peoples have of the common fund of ideas. The common mental dictionary is not merely a version of the traditional notion of a universal language but also a novel attempt to retain the imaginative and individual diversity of the imaginative universals.

Chapter 4 takes a closer look at Vico's description of the common mental dictionary in the *First New Science*. I shall conclude this chapter by turning briefly to the semiotic traits of the poetic characters (which ultimately undergo a sort of dialectical sublation in articulated languages), based on Vico's description of them in the *Third New Science* in the section on poetic logic. This section is principally devoted to one of Vico's two critical pet peeves—namely, the conceit of the scholars. By unearthing the prerational roots and prelinguistic forms of human semiosis, *poetic* logic undermines the arrogant view of humans as exclusively rational and logical beings. In addition to highlighting the scientificity of the *New Science*, the notion of a mental dictionary primarily buttresses Vico's other critical concern; namely, the critique of ethnocentric prejudices. By uncovering a human commonality that goes beyond national particularity, Vico deflates the conceit of the nations, which tend to universalize what it is particular to them.

GESTURES AND OBJECTS (*SĒMATA*), WORDS

Sematogenesis or semiosis?

No study of Vico's sematology can ignore the fact that it is profoundly diachronic. Vichian sign theory primarily seeks to grasp sematogenesis (the development of human semiotic behavior over time), not semiosis (the synchronic functioning of signs and language).

Eugenio Coseriu's reading stresses this aspect of Vico's linguistic thought and also views it as Vico's particular limitation. Like Antonio Pagliaro (Pagliaro 1959) before him, Coseriu cautions against functionalist interpretations of Vico's concept of language. Such interpretations strip Vico's sematology of its diachronic character and reduce it to its underlying functional truth; namely, the eternal origin. In Kantian terms, Coseriu warns against misreading Vico's account of the temporal beginning (*Anheben*) of semiosis as a transcendental arising out of (*Entspringen*) (Coseriu 1972: 100–3). While heeding Coseriu's hortatory words, I shall nevertheless attempt to read Vichian sematogenesis as functional semiosis as well.

One, though not the only, justification for such a reading is that in two often-quoted passages Vico explains that the languages of his three-stage developmental model were actually formed simultaneously:

To enter now upon the extremely difficult [question of the] way in which these three kinds of languages and letters were formed, we must establish this principle: that as gods, heroes, and men began at the same time (for they were, after all, men who imagined the gods and believed their own heroic nature to be a mixture of the divine and human natures) so these three languages began at the same time, each having its letters, which developed along with it.

(§446)

To follow up what has already been said: at the same time that the divine character of Jove took shape—the first human thought in

the gentile world—articulate language began to develop by way of onomatopoeia, through which we still find children happily expressing themselves.

(§447)

In the third passage usually cited in this context, Vico emphasizes that the advent of human language does not put an end to the poetic nature of the first two phases of linguistic development:

The poetic speech [*favella poetica*] which our poetic logic has helped us to understand continued for a long time into the historical period, much as great and rapid rivers continue far into the sea, keeping sweet the waters borne on by the force of their flow.

(§412)

Poetic speech thus seems to be an eternal—in other words, functional—characteristic of language in general.

These passages are usually read as contradictions of the otherwise diachronic thrust of Vico's thought. Pagliaro interprets them as signaling a turn from diachrony to functionalism and as representing something like Vico's last word on the matter. Rather than locating a shift from a diachronic to a functionalist perspective, I read these passages as evidence for the simultaneity of both perspectives. This contention is supported by one of Vico's most famous axioms, in which he relates both perspectives to one another dialectically: "The nature of institutions is nothing but their coming into being at certain times and in certain guises. Whenever the time and guise are thus and so, such and not otherwise are the institutions that come into being" (§147). Coseriu understands this maxim to mean that describing something's nature amounts to narrating its genesis, a reading in which the functionalist perspective completely dissolves into the diachronic. It is, in my opinion, legitimate to interpret the axiom as saying that an object's coming into being is sublated (*aufgehoben* in the Hegelian sense) in its nature. Here, though history informs the functionalist perspective such that an object's nature is explained by its history, the description itself remains functional. Lia Formigari's interpretation also supports my reading (Formigari 1987). She, too, rejects Pagliaro's functionalist view, but at the same time does not consider the diachronic perspective to be the only legitimate one. Instead, she also discerns a simultaneity of the two perspectives and recognizes a functionalist moment in which the historical perspective is sublated.

Finally, I do not wish to exclude a functionalist interpretation of Vico's diachronic model because eighteenth-century theories of language origin are not typically based on documentary and historical evidence of

humans' linguistic development. On the contrary, they mobilize synchronic and functional knowledge about language to generate conjectural histories of its genesis and development. This is particularly evident in Enlightenment theories of language origin that reconstruct the development of linguistic categories. Such theories usually place the traditional grammatical categories in a developmental sequence. Condillac, for example, asserts in 1746 that first came nouns, then verbs, then adjectives, then particles (prepositions and conjunctions), and finally pronouns (Condillac 2001: 156–201). In the sections of the *Third New Science* that address the development of speech (§§447–53), Vico also posits a sequence of grammatical categories: after onomatopoeia and interjections came pronouns, then prepositions, then nouns, and lastly verbs. Eighteenth-century theorists obviously don't have the slightest proof for their conjectural histories. They simply give temporal primacy to what they believe has functional primacy. In the next century, Jacob Grimm will extend the reach of "genuine" (in other words, documented) knowledge into the deep, dark mists of the past in his 1852 essay on the origin of language.

From this perspective, Vico's remarks on the simultaneous origin of the three languages would appear to be more than an inconsistent yet prescient adumbration of the functionalist perspective. They indicate, rather, that his conjectural diachrony is based on synchronic and structural insights into human semiosis. For human semiosis is indeed characterized by the simultaneity of gestures, images, and words, the simultaneity of sacred objects, poetry, symbols of power, and ordinary language. It is characterized by the simultaneity of what Peirce would call indices, icons, and symbols.¹ Vico's description of sematogenesis is definitely informed by his insights into the many varieties of semiosis from a material, political, and structural perspective, varieties that he articulates as a sequence.

Gestures and bodies: divine language

In harmony with these three kinds of nature and government, three kinds of language were spoken which compose the vocabulary of this Science: (1) That of the time of the families when gentile men were newly received into humanity. This, we shall find, was a mute language of signs and physical objects [*cenni o corpi*] having natural relations to the ideas they wished to express. (§32)

Of the three languages humanity is supposed to have spoken in the course of its development from barbarism to truly human civilization, the first is perhaps the most difficult to fathom. Vico first mentions the first language in the above passage, in which he discusses its materiality (its signifiers are

gestures and physical objects) and its structure (there is a natural relation between its signifieds and signifiers).² The *corpi* are physical objects which the first poets elevate to the status of signs by “mutely pointing” at them (§402), through which the signs become “real words” (§435). Examples of physical objects are the three ears of grain that stand for three harvests and thus for three years (§431). The corresponding gesture (*cenno* or *atto*) with the same meaning is the swinging of a scythe three times, which is how the first poets “danced” the idea “three years.”

Sacredness

By imbuing physical objects with a soul and creating animated substances, the first peoples create divinities in their own image. The animated brooks, rivers, and trees are the first poetic characters and, at the same time, gods. The first language is a “hieroglyphic or sacred or secret language, by means of mute acts. This is suited to the uses of religion, for which observance is more important than discussion” (§32). Vico also calls the sacred language “divine” (§432), the “language of the gods” (§§174 and 437), and “natural speech” (§§227 and 401). This sounds contradictory if one considers that in Vico’s era natural and divine tended to be opposing terms. The eighteenth-century debate on language origin was ultimately about whether Adamic language was divine (as theologians believed), natural (as Jean-Jacques Rousseau contended), or human (as Johann Gottfried Herder emphasized). I discuss Rousseau and Herder’s theories in Chapter 5.

But Vico’s assertion that the first gentile language was divine does not mean that it was created or given by God. As we have seen, it was poetic, which means that the gentile humans of the origin—the poets—created it themselves. Only the language God gave to Adam is divine in the traditional sense. Yet Vico is not referring to Adamic language, since his historical reconstruction does not contest the Bible. Vico only speaks about the *gentes*, whose language is divine in a different sense. He calls this repertoire of signs the “language of the gods,” since it is a catalog of the gods created by the theological poets, comprising all the physical objects and phenomena that are imagined to be gods. The Romans’ “divine vocabulary” consisted of 30,000 gods (§437). “The Greeks too had gods to the number of thirty thousand, for they made a deity of every stone, spring, brook, plant, and offshore rock. Such deities included the dryads, hamadryads, oreads, and napeads” (§437).

Divine language is thus a language consisting of gods that represent early humans’ efforts to comprehend nature. The Romans’ 30,000 gods constitute “a copious divine vocabulary, with which the peoples of Latium might express all their human needs” (§437). At the origin, then, religion is not a temporally and spatially delimited type of human behavior, but is

of a piece with human needs. In other words, all of life is religion, and all that surrounds the first gentile peoples is animated substance. The language of the gods is only a language spoken *by* gods to the extent that the fathers of the nations and the poets of the origin considered themselves gods and allowed themselves to be worshiped as such (§449). But these gods are really men, and so their language is not the Adamic language instituted by the one, true God.

Naturalness

To what extent is this divine language also natural? At §§227 and 401, the locution “natural speech [*pavlar naturale*]” is clearly marked as a Plato citation. It refers to the Platonic term *physei*, which has been a feature of theoretical discussions of language since it was introduced in *Cratylus*. The term is central to the linguistic debate about whether words are linked to things naturally (*physei*) or arbitrarily (*synthēkē*). In the dialog, Cratylus defends the *physei* position and Hermogenes the *synthēkē* position (in addition to *synthēkē*, Hermogenes also calls the relationship between signifier and signified *homologia*, *nomos*, and *ethos*). The reference to the dialog enables Vico to invoke and at the same time distance himself from Plato.

Vico unequivocally rejects Cratylus’ notion that natural language corresponds to the nature (*ousía*) of things. Natural language “was not a language in accord with the nature of the things it dealt with” (§401). In this sense, only Adamic language, which was literally in-spired by God, was natural and captured the nature of things. In Vico’s words, God endowed Adam with “divine onomathesia, the giving of names to things according to the nature of each” (§401).

Neither divine nor natural refers to language’s creator. It is not nature, which in the eighteenth century serves as a sort of depersonified God, but the poets who create language. Humans create language themselves. In this sense, Vico’s notion of semiosis is largely antinatural. For Vico, language is created by human beings and is thus *thesei* (to use the other Greek term) or *civile* (to use Vico’s term). The fundamental Vichian dichotomy between the natural world and the civil world would not obtain if signs were formed by God or by nature. The civil world is constituted by signs humans make themselves.

That said, the first language is natural in all other respects, which is why Vico adopts the term in the first place. Like Plato’s term *physei*, Vico’s term *naturale* primarily refers to the relation between signifiers and ideas. The first signs are “acts and objects that had natural relations to the ideas they were meant to signify [*atti o corpi ch’avessero naturali rapporti all’idee che si volevan significar*]” (§34). Beginning with Plato, language theorists have defined natural relations between signifiers and signifieds mainly as iconic relations that establish a structural isomorphism between signifier and sig-

nified. This is doubtless what Vico means. It would pay to take a closer look at this relation.

Vico scholars have tended to overlook the mood of the verb in the above passage from §34 of the *Third New Science*. Whenever Vico writes of natural semiotic relations (for example, at §§32, 34, 401, 431, and 434), he uses the subjunctive form *avessero*. Vico does not say that signifiers actually have or had natural relations to their signifieds, but that they are supposed to have had such relations. It was the poets who intended that the gestures they made or the objects they designated should have natural relations to ideas. The naturalness of the relation between sign and idea is one that the poets established subjectively. It is a posited or thetic naturalness and not an objective one inherent in the objects. Vico thus inverts the traditional causal direction of the natural iconic relation. Words are first coined when humans project themselves onto natural objects and transform them into animated substances. Vico takes the same approach in his subsequent remarks about metaphor: the foot of a mountain is an example of *transporto*, of transferring the human body to a natural object.

In the case of the second type of divine semiosis discussed by Vico, the synthesis of internal (*anima*) and external (*sostanza*) is realized in the human body. This time it is not the human soul or mind that is projected onto objects; instead, it is the human body that is inscribed with meaning. Structurally, the process is the same. Mere corporeality is assigned meaning, mere substance is animated. The human body's hitherto meaningless movements are imbued with meaning: movement becomes gesture. Gestures embody the natural signifier–signified relation as a mimetic dance in which the writhing body “writes” (and becomes one with) its meaning.

Vico puts forward the axiom that “poetry is nothing but imitation” (§216). His equation of poesis with mimesis—the essence of natural semiosis—should be understood to mean that human creativity establishes the laws of mimesis. It is the poet who determines the mimetic relation for both the animation of objects (in which physical objects imitate humans) and for the animation of human bodies (in which humans imitate physical objects). Gestures and physical objects are supposed to have natural relations to the ideas the poet wishes to signify.

The thetic naturalness of the signifier–signified relation is not primarily one of mere structural similarity or isomorphism. First and foremost, it is synthesis and is tantamount to the identity of signifier and idea. In Vico's example of the first copious divine vocabulary with its 30,000 deities, the stones and springs are—or are supposed to be—gods. The ideas are contained within the rocks, trees, and brooks. Lightning does not just refer to the idea of a god. Lightning *is* Jove. Whatever the first nations encounter is for them a god. They animate the entire universe: “whatever these men saw, imagined, or even made or did themselves they believed to be Jove;

and to all of the universe that came within their scope, and to all its parts, they gave the being of animate substance” (§379).

Even when Vico differentiates between physical objects and the ideas they signify, all of his examples make it evident that from a structural point of view the naturalness of primitive semiotic entities represents an amalgam of expression and content, a synthesis of material signifier and mental idea. The analogy is clear: in the same way that the first Maker made Adam human by breathing a soul into his body, the first human poets transformed physical objects into signs and thoughts (*logos*) by animating them with their ideas and meanings. But the analogy also suggests that the synthesis can be unmade and that sematological death looms. The soul can be separated from the body. In this sense, humanity’s sematogenetic development is akin to a gradual death. In the second stage of semiotic development, the natural relation—the synthesis of signifier and signified—slowly dissolves as the signifier–signified relation becomes merely one of resemblance. In the arbitrary signifier–signified relation of the third stage, the body of the sign seems to have lost its semiotic soul. The third and final stage appears to be characterized by an unbridgeable gap between signifier and signified similar to that which separates Descartes’s two substances. It is, however, precisely against the complete dissolution of the structurally isomorphic relation between signifier and signified—against semiotic death—that Vico’s sematology is aimed.

The naturalness of the first language is not confined to the iconic relation between signifier and signified. For naturalness also means *physis* in the sense of corporeality. On the object side, the first signs are the physical objects themselves which Vico explicitly calls bodies (*corpi*). On the subject side, they are human bodies. In the following passage, Vico explains these two varieties of primordial semiosis:

The philosophers and philologists should all have begun to treat of the origins of languages and letters from the following principles. (1) That the first men of the gentile world conceived ideas of things by imaginative characters of animate and mute substances. (2) That they expressed themselves by means of gestures or physical objects which had natural relations with the ideas; for example, three ears of grain, or acting as if swinging a scythe three times, to signify three years. (3) That they thus expressed themselves by a language with natural significations [*naturalmente significasse*].

(§431)

Here, Vico again thematizes the iconic relation between signifiers and ideas and again uses the subjunctive—*significasse*—to indicate that the relations are posited by the poets. What primarily interests me in the

passage is its reference to naturalness in the sense of corporeality. The human body and physical objects signify something. Vico also refers to physical-object signifiers as “real words [*parole reali*]” (§§99 and 435) and calls this kind of communication “speech by physical things [*parlar con le cose*]” (§435). His favorite example of this is the already-mentioned message that King Idanthysus sends in reply to Darius’ declaration of war: a frog, a mouse, a bird, a plowshare, and a bow. William Warburton and Rousseau also cite this famous Herodotus tale in their accounts of the origin of language (in fact, Warburton could be the link in a reception chain between Vico and Rousseau):

The frog signified that he, Idanthysus, was born of the earth of Scythia as frogs are born of the earth in summer rains, so that he was a son of the land. The mouse signified that he, like a mouse, had made his home where he was born; that is, that he had established his nation there. The bird signified that there the auspices were his; that is, that he was subject to none but God. The plowshare signified that he had reduced those lands to cultivation, and thus tamed and made them his own by force. And finally the bow signified that as supreme commander of the arms of Scythia he had the duty and the might to defend her.

(§435)

The extreme naturalness of the first signs, which are actual physical objects, makes it necessary that they be de-designated—declared to be signs—so that semiosis can proceed by means of an inner indexicality. For physical objects do not of themselves mean anything and must first be elevated to the status of signs. Creating signifiers does not yet involve the fashioning of material semiotic entities whose semioticity is self-evident, but in “mutely pointing” at or displaying already existing physical objects (§402). Vico’s notion of pointing at does not constitute an index in the Peircian sense. Pointing at a frog does not mean “this is a frog,” but rather raises the frog to the status of a sign: “the frog I am pointing at signifies the idea that I am a son of this earth.” Indexicality is only an internal, but nevertheless decisive, feature of the first signs. Pointing at is the means by which a frog is elevated from its status as an object and living thing (“firstness,” as Peirce would say) to semiotic status (“thirdness”).³

The subjective corporeal-gestural signs of the origin do not need to be designated. I do not need to point my finger at my bodily movements. If my actions are non-routine and consequently suggest that they must be interpreted as a signifier, they already have this indexical aspect. Gestures intended as signs cannot be part of a genuine activity. In other words, swinging a scythe is an ill-chosen signifier if I am standing in a wheat field during a harvest. If I swing a scythe it must instead be an imitative gesture

(the purpose of which is manifestly not linked to a real harvest) that signifies the idea “three harvests” and thus “three years.”

In both cases involving corporeal-natural signs, the origin of semiosis consists of removing physical objects or physical actions from their immediate context. The leap to thirdness is made by animating and by indexically presenting objects and actions. Of course, this crucial semiotic leap raises even the most natural language above the physical immediacy of firstness.

The first language is also natural and physical to the extent that the mental powers used to create it are, as Vico repeatedly emphasizes, corporeal (*corporenti*). Its signs are imaginative universals: concepts created by the imagination. Part of the omnificent memory, the imagination is a mental faculty that is still entirely “buried in the body [*tutte seppellite ne’ corpi*]” (§378). Vico thus opposes the corporeal origin of semiosis and of all mental activity to the conceit of the scholars, who believe that the mind’s contents have rational origins. *Logos* is natural because it emerges from corporeality. The mind is corporeal.

Another aspect of language’s naturalness is the issue of the original motivation for language. Language theorists have tried to explain why people speak at all and what problem language solves. The eighteenth-century debate on this question is replete with so-called natural causes for the beginning of language. For Condillac, physical needs like hunger and thirst are what set in motion the language creation process. From the passages cited above, it is clear that for Vico, too, language has physical, corporeal roots. Yet Vico also says unmistakably that language is born as “mental language” (§401). Which is it?

There are essentially two solutions to the problem of sematogenesis: the communicative option and the cognitive option. Communication has traditionally been seen as language’s primary function, which is why origin theories have tended to view language as the solution to a communicative problem. In Condillac’s version, probably the eighteenth-century’s best-known language genesis narrative, the need for mutual assistance leads to the invention of language. X has a need (such as hunger) that he or she cannot satisfy alone. This causes X to emit a passionate cry. Y infers X’s need from the passionate cry, pities X, and hurries over to help. The interaction brought about by the cry becomes habitual, and pretty soon you have language (Condillac 2001: 114–15). For Rousseau, however, physical need is an inadequate motivation for language creation, so he grounds the primordial interaction in a moral need: love (R/H: 44–5). Though Rousseau might have banished physical causes like hunger from his theory, communication remains, according to his paradigm, the primary motive for speaking.

Herder is a proponent of the cognitive option. After all, animals communicate. The invention of *human* language is not brought about by

mutual assistance born of physical need or by a moral, intersubjective need. For Herder, language arises from humans' "need to come to know [*Bedürfnis kennenzulernen*]" (R/H: 116). It arises from a specifically human, semantic orientation toward the world: our need to understand it. Herder sets his own notion of a noncorporeal need-to-come-to-know in opposition to the physical needs for nourishment and to those arising from the sex drive. As with Rousseau's sublimation of sexual desire into love, it is tempting to read Herder's *appetitus noscendi* as a sublimated alimentary or sexual desire.⁴

Because Vico nowhere narrates a story of language genesis in the manner of Condillac, Rousseau, and Herder, it is difficult to decide whether for him the invention of language primarily solves a communicative or a cognitive problem. With Vico, sematogenesis is inscribed into the account of the creation and development of the civil world. Humans' sociability apparently generates the need to communicate with others. Vico speaks in this context of the "need to explain and be understood" (§34). Vico never suggests, however, that creative ur-humans—the poets of the origin—hoped to elicit pity, receive assistance, or inspire love. So humans' sociability is not grounded in a supposedly natural and corporeal primeval need. Vico apparently conceives sociability as a fundamental characteristic of human nature that requires no further explanation. At the beginning of the *Third New Science*, Vico asserts that human nature has "this principle property: that of being social" (§2). Rousseau, incidentally, sees things differently. He must go to great lengths to bring the dispersed and solitary ur-humans together into a community. It is not human nature but the natural world and natural disasters that bring humans together (R/H: 40).

For Vico, the invention of language is natural and simply accords with human nature because sociability is natural. Yet the need to communicate inherent in humans' sociability is encumbered by a sort of semiotic shortage, a "poverty of language" (§34). Consequently, sematogenesis does not meet a physical need, but rather the need for language itself, a need that corresponds to humans' sociability. Creating signs is a way to satisfy humans' natural socio-communicative need by ending the word dearth. In this way, Vico's explanation of sematogenesis addresses both fundamental linguistic functions: the semantic-cognitive and the pragmatic-communicative. In fact, Vico refers to both dimensions as the two sources of language: "Now the sources of all poetic locution are two: poverty of language and need to explain and be understood" (§34).

Nevertheless, in my opinion the cognitive-semantic source of sematogenesis—the need to overcome semiotic scarcity and to know the world—is at the forefront of Vico's theory. Communication and sociability are not problems, they are givens. Though it is not told at length in the way that the origin stories of Condillac, Rousseau, and Herder are, the

sematogenetic scene that Vico alludes to in various passages in the *New Science* is one of savage humans confronted with an alien and minatory natural world. They appropriate this threatening world by animating it or by imitating it with their bodies. Vico's primitive humans do not say "love me" (like Rousseau's) or "help me" (like Condillac's). Their first words are "that is the thundermaker!" or "the thundermaker is God!" By referring to the world with their first signs, Vico's ur-humans are closer to Herder's, who, when they come face to face with a sheep, exclaim: "Yes, you are that which bleats" (R/H: 117). Vico's model of sematogenesis is a variation on the Bible's story of Adam naming the animals, another trait it shares with Herder's paradigm. Like Adam, the first poets overcome the alienness of the natural world by naming it. But unlike in the biblical or Herderian texts, Vico's poets are not alone in the world. They seek to make themselves understood to others.

In sum, the question Vichian sematogenesis answers is not how humans organized social life, but rather how humans mentally processed the world. Vico's answer turns out to coincide with the first mental operation of traditional epistemologies, namely, *conceptio*. For Vico, *conceptio* is also a social and civil necessity. Unlike Condillac's notion of assistance, Vico's *conceptio* does not stem from social practice or joint activity, but is primarily a poetic processing of the world, a processing that is at the same time rooted in humans' sociability. Humboldt observes that the point of human language is not to incite one's fellow beings to action via empathy (since animals are also capable of this), but rather to understand by thinking together: "Verstehen durch Mitdenken" (H, vol. 7: 583). Aptly characterizing the difference between Condillac's practical sematogenetic model and Vico's poetic model, *Mit-Denken* is a felicitous term that captures the simultaneously social (*Mit*) and cognitive (*Denken*) character of poetic sematogenesis in Vico's theory.

Muteness

Interestingly, Vico discusses the relation between thought and language in reference to the mediality of the first language, the mute language I mentioned in the previous chapter as I showed that Vico does not so much put forward a theory of language as he does a theory of semiosis. The first language is mute (*muta*) in two respects. First, it cannot be heard because it is an idea in the mind or "mental language" (§401). Second, it cannot be heard because it is something visible, not audible.⁵

In the first respect, Vico's assertion that the first language was mute seems to be in line with the European tradition, which has contended that the conception of an idea precedes its linguistic expression and that the former is a purely mental activity independent of the latter. In the second respect, Vico's notion muteness is decidedly unconventional. According to

the Aristotelian cognitive and linguistic paradigm that influenced the entire European tradition, the formation of an idea in the mind is followed by its material and phonetic signification. The idea is expressed by “spoken sounds [*ta en te phōnē*]” (Aristotle 1963: 16a). Vico’s notion of muteness represents a provocative departure from Aristotelianism. In the beginning, there was first and foremost something that could be seen. The first language was visual. In the beginning wasn’t the Word but (primarily) Writing. The first sign was a character:

“Logic” comes from *logos*, whose first and proper meaning was *fabula*, fable, carried over in Italian as *favella*, speech. In Greek the fable was also called *mythos*, myth, whence comes the Latin *mutus*, mute. For speech was born in mute times as mental [or sign] language, which Strabo in a golden passage says existed before vocal or articulate [language]; whence *logos* means both word and idea.

(§401)

Along with the locution “mental language,” Vico’s statement that the first poets wanted to “express” ideas (§32) seems to evince a quite traditional precedence of mental activity in the creation of *logos*. It appears that the poets first sought ideas and then the signifiers to go with them. Moreover, Vico defines character as “idea, form, model” and thus seems to conceive the first sign as something purely mental (§429). It is important to remember, however, that he also explicitly equates words and ideas, signifiers and signifieds: “*logos* means both word and idea” (§401). To put it another way, though *logos* may be formed as an idea, it is always already language; it must have a material existence, since it is intended for others. Ideas, whose etymon (*idein*: to see) refers to the body and its sensory apparatus, ultimately prove to be the words with which they are identical. They are signs inscribed with meaning. It is, then, legitimate to assume that from the beginning Vico’s model posits the identity of thought and language. However, what is meant is not spoken language but language in the very general Vichian sense; namely, a type of semiosis that is primarily visual. I am firmly convinced that Vico’s insistence on the muteness of *logos* has more to do with the second, anti-Aristotelian and anti-phonetic aspect (and thus with the primacy of visibility over audibility) than it does with primacy of mind over body. Vico transforms the traditional notion of thought’s logical and temporal primacy over language into the primacy of visual *logos* over phonetic *logos*, the primacy of writing. Vico quotes Strabo as saying that mental language existed “before vocal or articulate language” (§401). As Vico himself puts it: “all nations began to speak by writing [*parlarono scrivendo*]” (§429).

In sum, Vico’s poetic logic marks a semiotic turn in epistemology

(semiotic because it does not concern itself with spoken languages), a turn that went completely unnoticed by his contemporaries. It came before the more influential Condillac started down the path that would ultimately lead to Humboldt's linguistic synthesis of thought. Yet Vico's semiotic turn is more radical than Condillac's. It synthesizes thought and language (semiosis) and, by equating *mythos* and *logos*, views the beginnings of language-thought as wild creations of the imagination. The (artificial) sign is central to Condillac's theory of cognition, as well, since thought without signs cannot lead to human rationality. For Condillac, though, ideas are formed, in accordance with the European tradition, independently of signs. They are most certainly not imaginative fables or myths but products of analysis. In Vico's model, by contrast, the fabular idea comes into being as an ideal portrait that is simultaneously transferred to a signifier to which it has a natural relation; that is, with which it is identical. The tree *is* its divine meaning, thunder *is* Jove. Thinking is identical with signification. Humanity's first thought (Jove) and its first sign are the same: Jove is simultaneously its first "character." The divine character of Jove is the "first thought in the gentile world" (§447).

***Sēmata* and heroic language**

[The second kind of language was spoken] by means of heroic emblems, or similitudes, comparisons, images, metaphors, and natural descriptions, which make up that great body of the heroic language which was spoken at the time the heroes reigned.

(§32)

Heroics

Nothing more resembles a character than the engravings on coins or the shields of the mythic heroes. Heroic emblems, which belong to the second phase of humans' semiotic development, should be envisioned mainly as metallic emblems that serve as symbols of power. In the *First New Science*, Vico calls his description of the second linguistic stage in chapters XXVIII through XXV a "science of blazonry" and a "science of medals" (*FNS*: §§329 and 349). In the *Third New Science*, he lists this description as one of the three topics that he is proud of and that are still valid after his complete overhaul of the earlier edition (§28). Humanity's second language consists chiefly of pictorial and martial emblems. Vico speaks in this context of a "language of arms" (*FNS*: §342). The main purpose of such emblems is to "characterize" their bearer and to announce the hero's claim to power by identifying his estate (*poderi*). Vico equates the heroic emblems of power on shields and coins with the Homeric *sēmata* that Proetus scratched in a folded tablet:

The second kind of speech, corresponding to the age of heroes, was said by the Egyptians to have been spoken by symbols. To these may be reduced the heroic emblems, which must have been the mute comparisons which Homer calls *sēmata* (the signs in which the heroes wrote).

(§438)

Ingenium

We have already seen that the semiotic entities of the first and second phases of human development have important characteristics in common. The signs of the second stage are principally poetic characters with all the qualities I outlined in Chapter 2. Heroic signs are even more poetic than the signs of divine language, since metaphor is explicitly named as the trope proper to heroic language's images and resemblances. Poetic characters are therefore clearly products of *ingenium*.⁶ In the *First New Science*, Vico also calls the signs of the second stage "ingenious emblems [*imprese ingegnose*]" (*FNS*: §318). To the degree that it can be distinguished from memory and imagination, *ingenium* is the most creative and, in the Vichian sense, the most poetic level of primitive mental capacity, which can collectively be termed memory–imagination–invention (*memoria–fantasia–ingegno*). Whereas the imagination essentially repeats and alters the memory's contents, *ingenium* "is the faculty that connects disparate and diverse things" (Vico 1988b: 96). It is the true faculty of invention. As the principal trope of heroic language, metaphor flows, more than do the signs of the first stage, from the ability to combine diverse things. *Ingenium* is the faculty that underlies metaphor, which is described in the *Third New Science* as the ability to give "sense and passion to insensate things" (§404). As we have seen, the very first semiotic invention of the first stage was also an animation of insensate things and can thus be characterized as a metaphoric creation by *ingenium*. Nevertheless, by honing the ability to combine diverse things, the metaphoric creativity of the second stage is more "ingenious" than that of the first.

Resemblance

In the first sematogenetic stage, difference is not perceived as such. *Idea* and *parola* are identical. In the second stage, the primordial unity of signified and signifier starts to come undone; identity begins to dissolve and is succeeded by a resemblance (*somiglianza*) between the idea and its signifier.

Vico does not emphasize the different characteristics of the signs of the first age and those of the second. Though he addresses this structural difference by using the terms "natural relation" for the first stage and

“resemblance” for the second, one has the impression that he does not perhaps fully grasp (or want to grasp) its importance. Yet it is precisely the prying apart of the identity between signifier and idea that marks a decisive step in humans’ semiotic development. Indeed, it is the first step toward the dissolution of the intimate unity of signifier (body) and signified (mind), a process that ultimately leads to the arbitrary sign, which is rooted neither in identity nor resemblance. Interestingly, Vico downplays this structural difference, not because he does not recognize it but because he attaches importance to the structural resemblance between signifier and signified even in the case of the so-called arbitrary sign in which the resemblance is no longer apparent. It is precisely the traditional definition of arbitrariness—that there is an independent or noniconic relation between signifier and signified—that he rejects. For Vico, arbitrariness is mere appearance that his science sets out to deconstruct.

From gods to heroes

The differences Vico emphasizes between the three languages are not really structural differences. More important to him are the differences between their respective media, between the political systems they typify, and between the social spheres in which they are used. In terms of media, there is a gradual decrease in graphic or visual language and an increase in phonetic language. In addition to symbols and *sēmata*, poetic speech, which is phonetic, becomes increasingly important. Here, Vico mainly has the Homeric poems in mind. Compared with the predominantly mute and visual language of the first stage, the heroic language of the second stage is both articulate (meaning phonetic) and mute (meaning visual): “an equal mixture of articulate and mute” (§446). Vico never explains how or why this is so. From a political point of view, the heroes of the second stage have replaced the priests of the first stage as the masters of language. In the third phase, the people themselves will become language’s masters and will acquire ever-greater control of the natural physicality of the first language. As for the social spheres in which the three languages are used, the signs of the first phase refer primarily to religion (though all of life is essentially religion at this stage), whereas the heroes of the second phase are active principally in military and economic life, at least as far as visual semiosis goes. In terms of articulate, phonetic semiosis, the heroes create poetry. It is the “human” nations of the third stage who will be the first to use signs for daily life. The heroic age, however, is still far removed from such prosaic concerns.

Metaphor

I would now like to turn to Hayden White's noteworthy reading of Vico (White 1978). White locates a rhetorical distinction between Vico's three types of language and relates Vico's four fundamental tropes (synecdoche, metonymy, metaphor, and irony) to the three phases of semiotic development. As defined in Vico's *Art of Rhetoric*, the four tropes are characterized by different structural relations between statement and meaning:

Moreover, the meaning may be inverted in four ways—either from the whole to the part, and vice versa, or from the cause to the effect, and vice versa, or from similars, or from opposites. Hence, there are four primary tropes—synecdoche, metonymy, metaphor, and irony under which all others may be grouped.

(Vico 1996: 137)

At §§404–8 of the *Third New Science*, Vico discusses the four tropes in the following order: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. White interprets this descriptive sequence as a temporal sequence in the evolution of language. He sees metaphor, which Vico describes as the “most luminous and therefore the most necessary and frequent” trope (§404), as the fundamental semiotic mechanism of divine language. Metonymy characterizes the transition from the divine to the heroic epoch. Synecdoche represents the transition from the heroic to the human era. Finally, irony marks the decline of human society and semiosis.

As for irony, White is certainly right to point out that it is a type of lie (and thus whimsical, subjective, and arbitrary) and is thus only suited to human language. Yet Vico himself says that irony is a mode alien to early humans because they had the “simplicity of children” and “could not feign anything false” (§408). The signs of the first two language stages cannot be ironic because they have an iconic relation to ideas they represent. Irony is only possible following the dissolution of iconicity.

That said, I am not convinced of the accuracy of White's allotment of the other three rhetorical figures to the three phases and their concomitant forms of political organization. Vico unambiguously calls all three “the first tropes” (§404), and all belong, in fact, to the poetic language of the origin (though there is not a clear distinction between hieroglyphic and symbolic language). According to Vico, the “first poets attributed to bodies the being of animate substances” (§404). It is true that Vico views the animation of natural objects—the very first semiosis—as an example of metaphor. Metaphor “gives sense and passion to insensate things” (§404). This process is the result of ignorance. When man does not understand, “he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them” (§405). Yet Vico begins the next section

(§§406–7), which deals with metonymy and synecdoche, by stating that the first poets created metonymic and synecdochic expressions by obeying the very logic he describes at §405, the same imaginative and nonreflexive logic by means of which they mimetically imbued the world with themselves. Metonymy, synecdoche, and metaphor are thus merely different aspects of the same fundamental thought process. Everything is metaphor: *transporto*.

Nevertheless, it is still legitimate to ask whether the three metaphoric processes can be used to distinguish between the three language stages. According to Roman Jakobson's well-known definition, metonymy and synecdoche (which is really just a subcategory of metonymy) are based on contiguity and metaphor is based on similarity. White states quite accurately that synecdoche contains the seed of rationality (and thus of the human language of the third stage), since it raises particulars to universals. From this White concludes that synecdoche is responsible for the transition from the poetic age to the age of men. His conclusion is incorrect. Elevating particulars to universals is the general principle of sematogenesis. The poetic characters are, after all, imaginative universals and imaginative genera: universal concepts created by the imagination. Universality is already inscribed by means of synecdoche into the concrete thought of the first poets. Raising particulars to universals is not first a feature of the rational genera of the age of humans. This is why in the *First New Science* Vico explicitly defines "transformed . . . through metonymy" (or more precisely: synecdoche) as the first process of the first language: "For the nations must have begun by naming things from their most important and principal parts until, as they continued to compose things in this way, the word for a part came of itself to signify the whole" (*FNS*: §307). The natural relation between signifier and signified characteristic of the first language is a relation of contiguity. The ear of grain, which stands for "harvest," is itself part of the harvest. It is hard to imagine relations of contiguity that are more sweeping than the divine vocabulary's equation of idea and physical object. Thunder *is* Jove. Metaphor in a more restricted sense does not appear until the second, heroic stage, which is characterized by "metaphors, images, and resemblances" (*FNS*: §318). The principle of the second language is the resemblance between signifier and signified. As thought becomes increasingly abstract, contiguity gives way to resemblance. Metonymy and synecdoche dissolve into metaphor.

Despite the apparent clarity of the *First New Science* on this point, it would be wrong to propose an alternative sequence (metonymy/synecdoche → metaphor) to White's (metaphor → metonymy → synecdoche → irony). Such an attempt would overlook the fact that Vico explicitly defines the animation of the insensate world, the dawn of human sematogenesis, as an instantiation of metaphor. Giving "sense and passion to insensate things" is an example of ur-metaphor at work (§404). Transfer-

ence (*transporto*) is the primordial sematogenetic process. It is important to note that all three tropes carry out this movement and are, as such, poetic in the Vichian sense. The distinction between contiguity and resemblance is not, then, an appropriate means of establishing discrete subcategories of poetic language, since resemblance is a tropic mechanism of both the first (divine) and the second (heroic) language.

Words (human language)

[The third kind of language is h]uman language using words agreed upon by the people, a language of which they are absolute lords, and which is proper to the popular commonwealths and monarchical states; a language whereby the people may fix the meaning of the laws by which the nobles as well as the plebs are bound.

(§32)

Ordinary language

The real breakthrough in the development of human sematogenesis is not the transition from the first language to the second, but from the first two languages to the third. The third stage is where we encounter language in the more narrow sense. There are a number of issues in the famous passage quoted above that need to be resolved before we can address the question of whether Vico satisfactorily accounts for the transition to human language.

Vico is clearest about the political distinction between the third age and the other two. The absolute lords of human language are no longer the priests or the nobles, but the people. And that means everyone, which is why the language of the third age is the first human language. The term *lingua umana* does not imply that the other two languages were not made by humans, but rather that the third type of language belongs to an age “in which all men recognized themselves as equal in human nature” (§31).

The key transition from the primitive poetic ages to the fully modern age (or to the age that will become fully modern) takes place between the second and the third stages of human development. The civilized age stands in contrast to the wild and poetic primitive ages. So the sematological differences between the third and the two preceding sign systems are far more significant than those between the first and second. The differences result from a sweeping political upheaval. The priests of the first age and the nobles of the second essentially belong to the same ruling class. The victory of the plebs in the civil wars ends the rule of the few. Their victory represents the first real political revolution, which, in turn, affects

language. It is the people—and not the priests and nobles—who are now the absolute lords of language, and they use this vulgar language or language of the people (*volgare*) in the popular commonwealths and monarchies. Both of the latter are, according to Vico, forms of “human government,” in which all people are “equal in human nature” and therefore equal before the law (§31).

Human language is suited to “the common uses of life” (§32). The third language is thus specifically characterized as ordinary language. Its primarily communicative function is further defined by the locution “epistolary language [*lingua pistolare*]” (§32). It is a language whose purpose is to transmit a “message,” for which the Greek word is *epistolē*. As we saw above, divine language is appropriate for the religious comprehension of the world; heroic language, for the rule of the few.

But epistolary connotes more than communication. It also means “by letter.” *Epistolē*, as one could readily guess from the English word “epistle,” is also the Greek word for letter. For Vico also contends that *lingua pistolare* is appropriate for traversing distances. Human epistolary language is “suitable for expressing the needs of common everyday life in communication from a distance” (§439). This is a somewhat curious assertion when one considers that the third language is essentially articulate and phonetic (and that the commonwealths and monarchies of Vico’s human era do not have telephone service). Vico’s assertion defies definitive interpretation. On the one hand, it could be that he is not thinking about epistles at all but about the fact that the voice carries further than visual signs and is thus suitable for communicating from a distance. Perhaps phonetic language itself constitutes a sort of telecommunication when compared with the visual language of gestures, physical objects, and emblems. On the other hand, letters can be carried farther than the voice will carry. Hence, epistolary more likely refers to the graphic quality of the third language. This would seem to be substantiated by the fact that Vico obviously uses writing as his starting point when he thinks about phonetic speech. In the “Poetic Logic,” the description of the third language’s function is followed by three long sections that deal with the invention of alphabets or “vulgar letters,” as Vico calls them (§§440–2). It would seem that even when he discusses speech (*voci*) Vico is a theorist of writing.

The Italian and Latin term *voci* unmistakably announces the medium of the signifiers used in human language. Words are voices: *voces*. The transition to human language is a shift in medium from image to voice and from visual to acoustic semiosis. Moreover, the structure of a language consisting of words differs markedly from the structure of a language consisting of gestures, physical objects, emblems, and *sēmata*. The latter constitute complete statements or “texts,” as linguists would say today, whereas words are partial texts: elements from which texts and statements can be constructed. The existence of words is the decisive structural char-

acteristic that distinguishes human phonetic language from other semiotic options. As Vico puts it, words are “agreed upon by the people [*convenute da’ popoli*]” (§32). Today, linguists would say that words are “conventional.”

Of course, the assertion that language consists of conventional phonetic words that serve the purpose of communication is fully in line with the European tradition. So it is worth asking whether and how Vico’s sematogenetic theory articulates the transition from the first two stages of linguistic and political development to the third.

Vico scholars have repeatedly come to the conclusion that he either does not explain the transition at all or does not explain it satisfactorily. One must concede that the transition is more asserted than carefully argued. This interpretive impasse is doubtless the reason why Pagliaro opts for a functionalist solution. As we saw above, Pagliaro proposes that there are not three successive stages of sematogenetic development but rather a range of semiotic options that humans can access simultaneously. Gestures, emblems, and speech simply represent the various possibilities of human semiosis. This is certainly an elegant solution. Unfortunately, it neglects the relationships between the various language types (relationships that Vico repeatedly emphasizes in his diachronically organized argument) and indeed ignores the most crucial aspect of Vico’s language theory.

Without seeking to smooth over the theoretical wrinkles in Vico’s sematology (particularly with respect to the genesis of human language), I propose that his theory be read not so much as a theory of language but as a critique of traditional theories of language. In modern terms, I view Vico’s sematology as a critique of ordinary language and of the philosophy of ordinary language. After all, the most important theme of Vico’s philosophy is that modernity’s self-styled rationality has wild origins that live on, “much as great and rapid rivers continue far into the sea, keeping sweet the waters borne on by the force of their flow” (§412). Though Vico concurs with the European tradition’s functional definition of language, he contends that arbitrary, conventional, and communicative spoken language has a substratum. Vico articulates his critique as a history; that is, he conceives language’s substratum as something that precedes it temporally. But because that which is *prior* to still lies *beneath* human language, it is not irretrievably consigned to the past. Vico’s critical theory of language aims to prove that a visual, graphic, iconic (natural), theological, aristocratic, and expressive language continues to underlie rational, human, spoken language. His critique of language, directed at philosophers and philologists, would miss its mark if it were only a history of a past that is gone forever. The rest of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of the critical potential of the problematic moment of the transition to human language.

Articulation

The emergence of human language is most plausibly explained from a political perspective. *Lingua umana* results from the political transition from feudal societies to commonwealths and monarchies. In modern states, the absence of the continual military conflicts typical of heroic societies makes it possible for language to address humans' common, everyday needs. The emancipation of humans' linguistic and cognitive faculties is a concomitant of their political liberation from theocratic and feudal rule. To be the absolute lords over (*essere signori*) and to agree upon (*convenire*) words go hand in hand with greater freedom, increased rationality, and emancipation from the body, sensual perception, and the imagination (which Vico conceives as a corporeal faculty). In this regard, Vico seems to view human language as a positive development.

The transition from gestures and emblems to words is less satisfactorily explained from a medial and structural perspective. In fact, Vico shows little liking for human language in terms of its medium and structure and seems eager to trace the semiosis of human language to the earlier semiosis of the poetic characters. Yet it is precisely the awkwardness of the transition that makes it easier to grasp the purpose of Vico's critique.

The earlier stages of semiosis consisted of mute images, whereas the semiosis of human language is primarily phonetic-acoustic: *articolato*. What initiates the transition from one medium to the other? The transition is not an abrupt or unprecedented shift in human sematogenesis and is, in fact, only quantitative in nature. For according to Vico, both visual and acoustic signs exist from the very beginning. Indeed, in contrast to the precedence that is traditionally given to phonetic language, it is the very simultaneity of visual and phonetic language that is emphasized by Vico. Visual and phonetic-acoustic semiosis—"twins [*gemelle*]" that Vico also refers to as "writing" and "singing"—both exist from the start (§33). The beginning, however, is dominated by visual semiosis. Over the course of semiogenetic development, "writing" gradually wanes until, in the era of human language, phonetic semiosis predominates.

It is important to note, though, that Vico does not advance any reasons why phonetic-acoustic semiosis ultimately prevails. The revolution in semiotic media does not follow ineluctably from the political upheaval. For that matter, the muteness of primordial semiosis is itself not really proven. The only thing approaching evidence provided by Vico is the assertion that religions prefer to meditate rather than to speak. The mystery of why in the course of human development the emphasis shifts to phonetic-acoustic semiosis remains unsolved. Interestingly, recent biological research confirms Vico's evolutionary model. Whereas many primates can "write" in the Vichian sense of the term—that is, they can communicate gesturally and visually—phonetic language seems to be a specifically

human activity linked to a more recent evolutionary development of the brain. It is an ability that even primates closely related to humans do not possess.⁷

Vico obviously knew nothing about this. But the unexplained transition notwithstanding, Vico's key insight is into the fundamental connection between visual and acoustic semiosis. His conviction that gestures, emblems, and speech are related is at the center of his critique of the Western philosophical tradition and its theory of language. From a medial perspective, it is thus important (a) that Vico decouples semiosis and related epistemological issues from an exclusive focus on phonetic language and from *logos* understood as voice (*phōnē*), and (b) that he inscribes the body with a *logos* that is also *mythos*. His semiotic insights are that the entire body must be viewed as a potential site of semiosis, that writing and speech are twins, and that visual and acoustic semiotic systems are formed and function together. Vico therefore takes the classical conception of the human being as *zōon logoon ēkhon* to mean neither *animal rationale*, *animal linguisticum*, or *animal phoneticum*, but rather *animal symbolicum*, to borrow Cassirer's term. Yet by viewing *lingua umana* as the properly human language, Vico acknowledges the traditional notion that phonetic language plays the most important role in humans' symbolic and semiotic behavior.

The weakest part of Vico's sign theory is doubtless his hypothesis regarding the origin of words. Vico is convinced that words are condensed forms—abbreviations (*accordamenti*)—of sentences or messages. One of his most famous examples is the Latin word *ira*, which he takes to be an abbreviation of the sentence “the blood boils in my heart”:

For after the poets had formed poetic speech by associating particular ideas, . . . the peoples went on to form prose speech by contracting into a single word, as into a genus, the parts which poetic speech had associated. Take for example the poetic phrase “the blood boils in my heart,” based on a property natural, eternal, and common to all mankind. They took the blood, the boiling, and the heart, and made of them a single word, as it were a genus, called in Greek *stomakhos*, in Latin *ire*, and in Italian *collera*.

(§460)

The word *ira*, however, connotes neither boiling, blood, nor heart. Moreover, words generally do not have the structure of a predicate: *x* is *y*. Vico's theory relies on etymology, as does Plato's in *Cratylus*. But it is both historically inaccurate to suppose that words originate in a predicative or textual process and structurally inaccurate to suppose that words are essentially sentences or messages. This assertion ignores the characteristic

structural property of languages that consist of words. Words do not contain predicates. “Father” does not, as Vico assumes, mean “the father is the creator,” “the father is a poet,” or “the father has control of the weapons.” The word “father” does not make a statement about the world or an element of the world. Its function is merely to give us access to the world or one of its elements.⁸ By means of these elements we are then able to speak about the world. A word can be part of a message or a text, but is not itself a message.

Nevertheless, Vico’s erroneous assumption harbors both a valid ontogenetic insight and a valid critique of traditional language theory. By asserting that words have a predicative structure (that they are like statements and essentially textual), Vico points out that speech, along with gestures and emblems, is one of the semiotic processes that produces messages. Moreover, from an ontogenetic perspective, it is quite true that holophrastic semiotic processes precede articulate speech. The one-word sentences or holophrases uttered by infants—mama! dada!—are not really words, but entire statements that mean, say, “Dad, I’d like another spoonful of stewed carrots.” It is only later that children learn how to construct texts and messages using words; they can produce statements from the very beginning. But compared with holophrases, speech represents a revolutionary shift in semiotic practice, since its defining trait is the construction of messages from text particles. This is what it means to say that language is “articulate.” Vico’s term *articolato*, however, does not refer to structured content, but instead means produced by the voice, as his phrase “vocal and articulate” indicates (§401). Vico never elaborates his thoughts on phonetic articulation. In fact, all theories of language origin founded on interjections or onomatopoeia are problematic in view of the radical innovation of doubly articulated speech. For, as we saw in the case of infants, interjections and onomatopoeia are not words, but rather texts, holophrastic units, entire statements.⁹ The leap from textuality to speech is a qualitative one, and Vico’s theory of *accorciamento* does not explain it.

The problematic transition from poetic speech and *sēmata* to words highlights an integral feature of Vico’s sematology: it constitutes a theory of messages and texts, not a theory of words. Vico obviously knows that human language consists of words. But by giving speech a textual past and by making every word into a statement, Vico transforms his theory of language into a theory of texts. In this regard, he is again more of a semiotician than a linguist. This facet of his thought places him in the theoretical vicinity of Peirce (and consequently of Eco), whose semiotic philosophy is likewise a theory of statements (or of texts), not a philosophy of language.

Naturalness and conventionality

The third problem presented by the transition to word-based language is arbitrariness, which, for Vico, has two aspects: noniconicity and conventionality. With regard to the former, Vico is in full agreement with the European tradition, which holds that words are not iconic. But for him, noniconicity is mere appearance, and the profoundly anti-Aristotelian aim of his theory is to deconstruct this appearance. His objective is to disprove the thesis that words signify arbitrarily (*a placito*). From this perspective, the third stage of humans' language development is not distinguishable from the two that precede it. In fact, Vico intends to demonstrate that in reality—and this means: at their origin—languages “had natural significations” (§444). The mistaken opinion that words were not natural signs is made possible by the fact that at the origin the creators of words “regard[ed] the same utilities or necessities of human life from different points of view” (§445). Diverse climates and customs further modified what had been the same fundamental ideas. Vico is not blind to the rich variety of human languages; he does contend, though, that linguistic diversity blinds his intellectual adversaries to the originary naturalness of language and creates the mistaken impression that words are arbitrary. According to Vico, we must not be misled by the fact that the iconicity of words (the only aspect of naturalness I am addressing here) is, upon first inspection, invisible. Scratch the surface of a signifier, and the image will soon appear. At §38 of the *First New Science*, Vico claims to have proven this for the Latin language.

The arbitrariness of signifiers is deduced mainly from the existence of different languages. Yet the fact that I say “Pferd” and you say “horse” is not incontrovertible proof against an iconic relation or for an arbitrary relation between words and ideas. To discount the notion that signs are simply established (*thesei*), Vico pursues two lines of argument. First, he rehearses the examples of iconic words that Cratylus used to try to refute Hermogenes. Setting aside for a moment whether Vico's examples are correct, he puts forward the onomatopoeic word “Ious” for Jove, a word that depicts thunder. He also points to *homo* < *humus*, *humare*, relating the word “man” etymologically to both earth and burial. Second, Vico points out that the existence of different signifiers for the same ideas is not proof of noniconicity but of different underlying images. He demonstrates this by means of the example of the fathers, which he also used in the *First New Science*. Different languages perceive the same object from different angles and thus reflect the “different points of view [*aspetti diversi*]” (§445) of the fathers of the nations.

The fact that Eco felt compelled to rehearse Vico's important insight into the cultural particularity of images demonstrates how deeply rooted the notion of the universality of icons still is today. In order to disprove

Charles W. Morris, Eco explains that the iconic similitude between signifier and signified in no way means that icons are universally identical (Eco 1976: 192–200). There exists, rather, a culturally determined perception of resemblance that can be quite different (and quite differently structured) in different societies. Conversely, the assumption that there is something like a universal iconic process has likewise impeded the understanding of phonetic icons, such as onomatopoeia. The fact that such expressions are different in different languages seemed to cast doubt, said some (like Saussure), on their true iconicity (Saussure 1966: 69–70). But just because onomatopoetic formations are different does not mean that they are not icons, only that people see different resemblances between the image and its representation and that they structure these resemblances in different ways.

In contrast to the other aspects of the transition (acousticality and articulation), with regard to naturalness Vico argues explicitly in favor of a continuity between poetic and human language. Yet this very continuity is problematic, since words' supposed naturalness is not demonstrated convincingly. Vico does not succeed in shedding more light on the images or metaphors that are supposed to underlie words. His main example, that the name for Jove (*Iovis*) was originally an onomatopoetic imitation of thunder (*Ious*), cannot be proven.¹⁰ Moreover, many of his etymologies are incorrect. Nevertheless, Vico's admittedly awkward explanation of natural signification contains another valid linguistic insight. For Vico is correct to assert that language is not totally arbitrary. Saussure himself, the recognized champion of the arbitrary sign, accepts that the "relative motivation of signs" is a necessary ordering principle within the language system, a principle that in effect limits arbitrariness (Saussure 1966: 133). The most recent debate about the naturalness of linguistic processes, spawned by Jakobson's 1964 essay, "Quest for the Essence of Language," has brought to light many "natural" (iconic) semiotic processes that had been buried under narrow and dogmatic interpretations of the Saussurian *arbitraire du signe* (Jakobson 1966–1988, vol. 2: 345–59).

Vico does not entirely reject the traditional notion that linguistic signs are arbitrary. He concedes that human language is conventional, the other aspect of its arbitrariness. As we have seen, he asserts that words are "agreed upon by the people" (§32). What does this statement mean? Indeed, does not conventionality, the fact that language springs up by the peoples' "free consent" (§439), contradict his notion of natural language?

The apparent contradiction reveals that the two aspects of the arbitrariness of signs—a *placito* and *convenzione libera*—are discrete phenomena, a distinction that is frequently overlooked. Because the people have agreed upon the signs they use does not mean that these signs cannot at the same time be natural; that is, primarily iconic and metaphoric. To put it

another way, the people can create signs iconically and then agree on these iconic signs in their language community. The conventional aspect refers to the social group that uses a sign, and the natural aspect refers to signification, to a sign's relation to the world it signifies. Words are conventional because people convene to establish or retain them. In the previous two stages of language development, priests and nobles created signs without the people convening. Words are conventional because in the third stage humans live in a sematogenetic commonwealth, not in a sematogenetic oligarchy.

What does Vico mean by free consent? Can he mean that people meet in the marketplace and vote on which words are going to be allowed into their language? And how free is free consent? Of course, Vico does not imagine that the consent process resembles a referendum. Convention does not mean explicit agreement, but tradition.¹¹ According to Vico, the people exercise their linguistic sovereignty through their linguistic usage. He cites the futile attempts of Emperor Claudius and of Giorgio Trissino, the Renaissance grammarian, to introduce new letters into the Latin and Italian alphabets (§439). The people did not allow these proposals, despite their proponents' authority, to enter into the language. Free consent, then, is primarily the freedom from the tutelage of the heroes. Linguistic democracy is characterized by the power of linguistic usage or tradition, which is vested in the people themselves.

This gives some indication of how free the consent is. On the one hand, there is no limit to popular sovereignty. No one other than the people—neither an autocrat nor a renowned intellectual—can decide linguistic matters. On the other hand, the people cannot choose words arbitrarily. The naturalness of words marks the limit of free consent. The people are indeed absolute lords over words, but their absolute power is the right of heirs to take possession of the semiotic legacy of their parents. Their inheritance consists of natural signs and not of arbitrary new creations.

Vico's free consent thus refers only to the political dimension of speech. No one can undermine the peoples' sovereignty over language. In linguistic terms, this is an example of the people's pragmatic freedom (particularly from the authoritarian power of a single individual) and not of their semantic freedom. The people's sovereignty over language is the legacy of the primitive era from which the priests and heroes have left them poetic speech. Their sovereignty is the right to rule over this tradition. Vico fancies himself to be an anti-Aristotelian. But his protest is directed more at Aristotelianism and at the term *ad placitum* coined by Aristotle's Latin translators than it is at the Greek philosopher himself. In fact, Vico's phrase "agreed upon by the people" corresponds fairly closely to what Aristotle presumably means in *De interpretatione* by the words *kata synthēkēn*: "handed down by the people."¹²

Critique

However awkward might be the transition from the poetic language of the priests and heroes to the prosaic language of the people, Vico's sematogenetic approach reveals that his philosophical message goes beyond his fairly standard description of human language as a communicative tool consisting of conventional phonetic signs. His critical look into the past demonstrates that he aims to deconstruct this traditional concept of language. Our apparently civilized, conventional, rational, and noniconic language is built on a wild, nonconventional, imaginative, and iconic foundation. Beneath words is a substratum of *sēmata*.

Vico usually formulates the critical trust of his philosophy as a polemic against the logocentric conceit of the scholars. The arrogant scholars who are so proud of their rationality (*logos*) ought, he warns, to be more modest. For if they scratch the surface of signifiers they will soon uncover the savage, feral, and corporeal origins of *logos*. *Logos* is at its origin *mythos*. Moreover, by demonstrating that phonetic language is the twin of writing (and that the latter was originally the stronger of the two semiotic modes), Vico criticizes logocentrism's concomitant: phonocentrism.

Vico's deconstruction of human language also contains a second entreaty aimed at the ethnocentric conceit of the nations. For the nations that arrogantly consider themselves the fount of all culture ought also to take heed. Their supposedly unique national culture and language represent only one of the many possible perspectives of the things humanity has in common. The imaginative origin is the same everywhere, and all languages contain signifiers for a common set of primitive ideas. In particular, the proud Enlightenment-era Europeans ought to beware, for the native peoples of America are simply doing what Europeans did in earlier epochs. Beneath civilization lies savagery, beneath *favella* lies *favola*. The deconstruction of the various perspectives reveals that humanity is everywhere the same.

THE COMMON MENTAL DICTIONARY

The third passage

Near the beginning of the *Third New Science* (at §§28, 32, and 35), Vico mentions three passages from the *First New Science* that remain satisfyingly valid even after the work's complete revision. In the 1731 addendum to the *Autobiography*, Vico had stated that these passages are important enough to warrant being printed separately if it should prove impossible to republish the entire first edition (A: 192–3). It is noteworthy that all three passages that filled Vico with pride are from Book III of the *First New Science*, which deals with language. After nearly two decades of assiduous research and revision, it is Vico's sematological insights that rate inclusion in the new edition. The first passage is about the science of medals and blazonry, the second about the origins of Latin, and the third about the common mental dictionary. As we have seen, the science of medals and blazonry—the Vichian language of arms described in chapters XXVIII to XXXV of the *First New Science*—is Vico's theory of mute heroic emblems (*sēmata*) and represents the most developed part of his poetic sematology. The passage on the origins of Latin in chapter XXXVIII constitutes a treatise on Latin's monosyllabic ur-words and thus on the fundamental ideas of the primitive civil world. This primeval vocabulary includes the words for the divine father (*Ious*), for body parts (*os*, *dens*, *pen*), and for the first legal institutions (*pax*, *lex*, *crux*). The list plainly indicates which ideas are at stake in Vico's theory of language origin. For unlike Condillac's fructile object of desire or Herder's ovine object of knowledge, Vico's primordial ideas are not objects of the senses but represent the fundamental ideas of social life and the first civil institutions. From this perspective, Vico's sematology is also a theory of law. Finally, chapter XLIII on the common mental dictionary is the third passage from the *First New Science* that Vico considers a lasting achievement, one that seems to be of particular importance to him. Whereas for the first two passages Vico merely refers readers to the relevant section of the earlier edition, for the third passage he provides an extensive overview at §35 of the 1744 edition and repeats the overview at §162 and §445.

To help shed light on Vico's notion of the mental dictionary, which is somewhat difficult to grasp and has been largely ignored in the secondary literature, I include below the entire chapter on the mental dictionary from the *First New Science*, the third passage Vico is proud of. This edition, which already has helped to illuminate the heroic emblems of the second gentile language, is indispensable for an understanding of the mental dictionary. The *Third New Science* does not describe the mental dictionary in detail, whereas for the other two passages Vico is proud of (the passages on heroic emblems and the monosyllabic origin of spoken language) it adopts many of the first edition's examples.

In the *Third New Science*, Vico introduces the concept of the common mental dictionary by stating, somewhat mysteriously, that the three languages spoken during the three respective ages "compose the vocabulary of this Science" (§32). After describing the three languages at §34, Vico continues this line of thought as follows:

From these three languages is formed the mental dictionary by which to interpret properly all the various articulated languages, and we make use of it here wherever it is needed. In the first edition of the *New Science* we have a detailed illustration of it, in which this idea of it was presented: that from the eternal properties of the fathers, which we in virtue of this Science considered them to have had in the state of the families and of the first heroic cities in the time when the languages were formed, we find proper meanings [of terms] in fifteen different languages, both dead and living, by which they were diversely called, sometimes from one property and sometimes from another. (This is the third passage in which we take satisfaction in that edition of our book.) Such a lexicon is necessary for learning the languages spoken by the ideal eternal history traversed in time by the histories of all nations, and for scientifically adducing authorities to confirm what is discussed in the natural law of the gentes and hence in every particular jurisprudence.

(§35)

This passage raises a number of questions. First, how are we supposed to conceive of the divine, heroic, and human languages that comprise what Vico at §161 will call a "common" mental dictionary? And how do the individual languages draw their particular meanings from it? Vico's reference to the *First New Science* might help us solve the problem of the relation between eternal characteristics and particular meanings. Second, to what extent does the mental dictionary contain the language of the ideal eternal history, and does it confirm Vico's statement about natural law? And third, to what degree does Vico's science make use of the common

mental dictionary? In other words, to what degree is the common mental dictionary “proper” to Vico’s science (§161)? To help answer these questions, below is chapter XLIII, the final chapter of Book III of the *First New Science*.

The idea of a dictionary of mental words common to all nations

We conclude this book on language with the idea of a dictionary of the mental words, so to speak, common to all nations. Such a dictionary will explain the uniformity of their ideas concerning substance by means of the diverse modifications [of mind] which the nations would have for thinking about the identical human necessities and utilities that were common to all and, attending closely to such diversities in properties as would follow from diversities in their sites and climates and, hence, natures and customs, will narrate the origins of their different vocal languages, all of which unite in a common ideal language.

Staying with the same examples proper to our principles, let us now enumerate all the properties of the fathers in the state of the families and in that of the first cities to which this state gave rise:

- 1 of imagining deities;
- 2 of begetting certain children with certain women through certain divine auspices;
- 3 of being, therefore, of heroic or Herculean origin [for the following reasons]:
- 4 because they possessed the science of the auspices, i.e., of divination;
- 5 because they made sacrifices in their houses;
- 6 because of their infinite power over their families;
- 7 because of the strength with which they slew the wild animals, tamed the uncultivated land, and defended their fields against the impious vagabonds who came to steal their harvests;
- 8 because of the magnanimity with which they received into their asylums the impious vagabonds who, endangered by the quarrels of Hobbes’s violent men in the state of bestial communion, sought refuge in them;
- 9 because of the height of fame to which their virtue in suppressing the violent and assisting the weak had raised them;
- 10 because of the sovereign ownership of their fields that they acquired naturally through such exploits;
- 11 because, consequently, of their sovereign command of arms, which is always conjoined with sovereign ownership;

12 and, finally, because of their sovereign will over the laws, and therefore also punishments, which is conjoined with sovereign command of arms.

Hence the Hebrews would have called the fathers "Levites" from *el*, which means "strong"; the Assyrians "Chaldeans," i.e. sages; the Persians, "magi" or diviners; and the Egyptians, as everyone knows, "priests." The Greeks had a variety of names for them. Sometimes they were the "heroic poets": "poets" from divination, because the poets were said to be "divine" from *divinari* ["to divine"]; and "heroes," amongst whom were Orpheus, Amphion, and Linus, because they were believed to be the children of the gods. At other times, for their infinite power, they were "kings," which was the appearance which led Pyrrhus' ambassadors to speak of having seen a senate of kings in Rome. For their strength they were also called *aristoi* from *Ares* or Mars, rather like "the martial ones" from whom, because the first cities were composed of them, the first form of civil governments was aristocratic. Throughout Saturnia, i.e. Italy, Crete, and everywhere in Asia, for their appearance as armed priests, they were called *Curetes*. But first, with special significance, throughout all Greece they were called "Heraclids," or those of the Herculean races, a name that survived among the Spartans, who were certainly armed with spears and whose kingdom was undoubtedly aristocratic. In precisely the same way, the Latin peoples referred to them as *quirites*, or priests armed with a spear, the Latin for which was *quir*, and as such they were the *Curetes* of Saturn whom the Greeks observed in Italy. They were also the *optimi*, meaning "the strongest," just as the ancient *fortus* ["strong"] meant the same as our *bonus* ["good"] today; and the republics that they later came to compose were the "republics of the optimates," corresponding to the aristocratic, i.e. "martial," republics of the Greeks. Because of their absolute lordship over their families, they were lords or *heri*, which even sounds like "heroes," and their patrimony after death continued to be their *hereditas*, or "lordship," which, as demonstrated above [*FNS*: §369], the Law of the Twelve Tables left intact to them through the custom whereby people who belonged to a gens made dispositions in the manner of sovereigns. For their strength they were also called *viri*, again corresponding to the "heroes" of the Greeks. Hence *viri* survived as the name for those who were husbands by solemn marriage, who, as we have found, were the only nobles in ancient Roman history until six years after the Law of the Twelve Tables. Others to be called *viri* were the magistrates, such as the *duumviri* ["the duumvirs"] and the *decemviri* ["the

council of ten”], the priests, as in *quindecimviri* [“the college of fifteen”] and *vigintiviri* [“the board of twenty”], and, finally, the judges, as in *centumviri* [“the bench of a hundred”]. Thus this one word, *vir*, expressed wisdom, priesthood, and kingship, which, as demonstrated above [FNS: §132], were one and the same thing in the persons of the fathers in the state of the families. Hence also, but with even greater propriety than any of the other peoples, the Latins called them “fathers,” from the certainty of their children. For the same reason, the nobles were “patricians,” as, similarly, they were the *eupatrides* of the Athenians. In the returned barbaric times, they were called “barons”: hence, and not without surprise, Hotman noted that in feudal doctrine the word *homines* [“men”] was reserved for vassals. This was precisely the same difference that the words *vir* and *homo* retained among the Latins: *vir* was a word for virtue and, indeed, as we have seen, civil virtue, but *homo* denoted a man of ordinary nature with an obligation to follow those with the right to lead. The Greeks called such a man *bas*, the Latins *vas*, and the Germans *Wass*, from which came *vassus* and *vassallus* [“vassal”]. This distinction must certainly also have been the origin from which the word *baron* [*varon*], meaning “male,” survived in Spanish, just as *vir* later survived in Latin to distinguish male from female, and of the *homagium*, somewhat akin to *hominis agium* [“the right to lead men”], in which the heroic law of the bond consisted, which was the source of all the heroic disputes narrated above [FNS: §§161–7] in ancient Roman history. Hence we can see how much science Cujas and the others have written about the origin of fiefs!

[FNS: §§387–9]

The fathers

Chapter XLIII provides a detailed response to the first question of how the mental dictionary gives the particular meanings to the phonetic languages. Vico lists twelve eternal properties of the founders or fathers of nations, properties that are quite obviously related to one another. Together, these eternal properties constitute the mental word (*voce mentale*) of the common ideal language. Taking as his example the words for father, Vico demonstrates that each language selects one or several of the eternal properties and signifies it/them with one or more words. It is quite possible for two languages to opt for the same property. Hebrew and Latin, for example, choose the property “strong.” A language can also have several words for the same object, since objects have a number of possible properties. A single word can likewise signify several properties. *Viri*, according to Vico, comprehends the properties of strength,

wisdom, priesthood, and regime. It is apparently even possible for eternal properties to be ignored (as seems to be the case with eternal property number eight, the harboring of vagabonds). To return for a moment to a subject discussed in the previous chapter, the eternal properties are prime examples of the Vichian notion that words constitute statements. Each word predicates something about the object, such as “the father carries a spear,” “the father is strong,” or “the father is a priest.”

The “fabulous history of the Greeks” and “certain Roman history” are the principal sources of Vico’s eternal paternal properties (*FNS*: §474). The twelve properties of the word “father” are a compendium of the attributes of the heroes of fictional Greek history (Hercules, Orpheus, and Odysseus) and of the attributes of the legal institutions of factual Roman history. Together, they comprise something like an ur-myth that is supposedly shared by all of humanity. This helps to illuminate Vico’s cryptic assertion that the three languages of humanity “form” the common mental dictionary. The eternal properties of mental words are composed of the poetic characters documented in the collection of signs that Vico calls “philology”: the history, mythology, and poetry of the nations. The Hercules myth (the poetic character Hercules) is the source of the properties “strength” and “slayer of wild animals.” It is true that the eternal properties derive primarily from the heroic language of humanity’s second stage of development. Yet by naming all three languages as sources of the mental dictionary, Vico bases it on all human sign production. Vico’s statement that the three languages “form” the mental dictionary essentially means that the mental words common to all nations stem from the signs created by the poets of the origin. In other words, the eternal properties have a sematologic origin.

Is Vico’s argument circular? There is obviously nothing a priori about the common ideal language. It is not a dictionary of pure concepts in the Kantian sense. Instead, the eternal properties of its mental words originate in the poetic characters, the *sēmata*. Empirical philological research is the source of this “philosophical” language that apparently induces universal properties from empirical material. The argument is indeed circular if phonetic languages draw their meanings from the universal properties that had been inferred from them in the first place. But Vico doesn’t seem to see it this way. For him, the universal properties of mental language belong to a stage of language that predates spoken, articulate language and that corresponds to the age of the families and the first cities. It is from these that the subsequent phonetic languages draw their individual perspectives. Vico’s grounding of the later phonetic languages in primarily visual myths is also of central importance for the relation between phonetic languages and the common mental dictionary. Nevertheless, the circularity of Vico’s argument can hardly be denied. Indeed, circularity is constitutive of his theory of culture, which does not distinguish clearly between universals and particulars. For universals are not abstractions that reduce all indi-

vidual exemplars to their lowest common denominator. Vico does not contend that in all languages all of the words for father mean “strong.” Instead, universals are collections of specific properties. Hence, Vico’s line of argument is that all words for father have one or more of the following meanings: “strong,” “priest,” “ruler,” “god-maker,” and so forth.

In principle, the list of eternal properties is open-ended and could be expanded by further empirical research. If a nation draws on a previously unnamed property to signify an object, that property can be added to the dictionary. It is easy to imagine a myth being supplemented by new sources, new languages, and new stories. One could, for example, augment Vico’s etymological examples *heri*, *hērōi*, and *viri* with the Germanic word for father, *Her*, which means “white-haired” (*herivo*). The property “white-haired,” which is further substantiated by the fact that the Romans also called their fathers “white-haired” (*senior*), would then be added to the list of paternal properties.

Universal common mental words constitute mythology in its broadest sense. This is Vico’s version of concrete universals, a version that differs both from Hegel’s dialectic sublation of historical particulars and Humboldt’s dialogic union of particulars and universals. Vico’s assembly of the complete myth of the father from disparate sematological material amounts to neither a Hegelian concept of the ur-father nor a Humboldtian collection of concrete father figures.

In addition to articulating the relation between universals and particulars, the chapter about the fathers from the *First New Science* defines more precisely Vico’s conception of the semiotic structure of phonetic speech. It is noteworthy that Vico does not distinguish between signifier and signified in his discussion of the various words for father. He says, for example, that the Persians called the fathers magicians (*maghi*) or sorcerers (*indovini*). Of course, he does not mean that the Persians actually used the signifier *magi*, but that the Persian word for father (which Vico does not mention) would have signified magician. In other cases, Vico refers to the signifier, as when he derives *Quirites* from the word *quir*, or *aristoi* from *Ares*. It is evident in such instances that the signifier’s identity or resemblance always implies an identical meaning. *Quir* means “spear,” so the *Quirites* are “men armed with spears.” *Ares* is strong, so *aristoi* are “strong men” or “men of Ares/Mars” (*marziali*). Sometimes it is unclear whether Vico is referring to the signifier or the signified; the one seems to dissolve into the other. When he writes that the Greeks called the fathers “poet-heroes” (*poeti eroi*), he does indeed have these two Greek signifiers in mind. In the case of *eroi*, this is demonstrated by the fact that Vico later relates it to the Latin *heri* and *viri*. In the case of *poeti*, however, he is merely referring to signifieds of his own invention when he adds that the fathers were called “diviners” and “divine” (*divini*), though he then justifies this semantic explanation by comparing the signifiers *divinari* and *divini*.

Vico's vacillation does not imply that he cannot distinguish between signifiers and signifieds. He is perfectly familiar with the semiotic dualism of occidental language theory and this tradition's notion of words as arbitrary signifiers of ideas. It is precisely the theoretical framework he is attempting to break out of. Vico's intuition is correct that the structure of words is not adequately understood by means of Aristotelian sign theory. The alternative he so vigorously advances is to view words as icons or symbols. In an iconic structure, signifier and signified are melded together. Signifiers are not arbitrary (*ad placitum*); instead, meaning is inscribed into their material form. Vico flits back and forth in his examples between signifier and signified precisely because he intends to leave them undifferentiated.

Despite his rejection of the arbitrary sign in favor of the icon, Vico nevertheless retains a fundamentally semiotic conception of language. He cannot seem to escape the sign's gravitational pull. In the course of human history, primitive images and myths become increasingly arbitrary and sign-like. By charting the course that takes mankind from icon to sign, Vico discovers the locus of language; namely, the locus between icon and sign. But he is not yet able to conceive of the characteristic structure of language that lies between these two semiotic entities. This is the so-called double articulation, the structure peculiar to language that articulates the world into "portions of thought [*Portionen des Denkens*]" or "morphemes," whose material side is articulated into phonemes (H, vol. 7: 581). Language synthesizes both articulations into an indivisible entity.¹

Vico's examples also make it clear that a word's direct iconic relation to an object is no longer necessarily recognizable. At the origin of phonetic language there is a direct iconic relation, as Vico demonstrates with the onomatopoeic ur-word *Ious*. But it is more important that words stand in a motivated relation to one another, thereby reflecting the world's fundamental connectedness. Though the fathers were called *aristoi*, this signifier is not a direct or onomatopoeic image, but rather an indirect, metaphorical image that refers to Ares, the mighty god of war. Rather than direct iconicity, the relative motivation of words, as Saussure called relations like Ares/*aristoi* and *quir/quirites*, represents the similarity between language and the world (Saussure 1966: 131–4).

There are interconnecting resemblances between languages, as well. Greek *hērōi* evokes Latin *heri* and *viri*, just as the Latin *viri* evokes Spanish *varón*. Like the boundaries between signifier and signified, those between Greek and Latin (and between these two languages and Italian) are fluid. The Latin form can be perceived in the Italian, and the Greek form in the Latin. Indeed, Vico puts italianized words into the mouths of the ancients by claiming that the Romans called fathers *padri* and nobles *patrizi* (and that the Greeks called the latter *eupatridas*). In reality, of course, the Romans said *patres* and *patrici* (and the Greeks *eupatrides*, not *eupatridas*).

For Vico, though, the differences between Italian, Latin, and Greek are insignificant, since the words are ultimately identical anyway. This identity begins to foreshadow the purpose of Vico's increasingly curious project of the mental dictionary and consequently brings me to the second question I set out to answer: to what extent is the common mental dictionary the language of the ideal eternal history?

Harmonia linguarum and ius naturale

Chapter XLIII of the *First New Science*, which Vico summarizes three times in the *Third New Science*, is the final chapter of Book III, which investigates the origins of the civil world in terms of language (*per le lingue*). In Book II of the first edition, Vico presents the principles of his new science concerning ideas (*per l'idee*). In a certain sense, chapter XLIII represents the conclusion and the climax of the entire work, since the final two books amount to little more than methodological and historical appendices. It would not be going too far to state that the *First New Science* culminates in the dictionary of mental words and that the idea of the common mental dictionary contains the quintessence of Vico's new science.

This assertion may sound exaggerated considering the text's wild etymological speculations. Yet it is accurate if one can grasp, among the thistles of the somewhat adventurous etymologies, what Vico hoped to achieve philosophically in chapter XLIII. The key issue is not really whether the etymologies are correct. Some are and some are not. Latin *patres* and Greek *eupatrides* of course do have the same root. But the etymon of *vassallus* is the Celtic root *gwas* meaning "young man" and not Greek *bas* ("went" from Greek *bainō?*), Latin *vas* (from *vadis*: "guarantees" or "bonds"), or Germanic *Wass* (?). Spanish *varón* does not come from Latin *vir*, but is at least related, via French and Germanic, to the Indo-European stem *vir*. Greek *hērōs* and Latin *heres*, Greek *Ares* and *aristos* have nothing in common etymologically. And Vico's own theory of the god-creating ur-poets is the only place one can find Greek *poiētēs* linked etymologically to Latin *divinatio*, *divinari*, and *divini*. But Vico's etymologies are no more egregious than those of the entire prescientific European tradition from Plato, to Isidore of Seville, to seventeenth-century *etymologica*. And they are certainly no worse than Heidegger's, who at least ought to have known better.

More important than the inventiveness of Vico's etymologies is their role in his theory. Vico's objective is to discern in (or perhaps more accurately: underneath) the words of various languages a fundamental commonality that manifests itself in a resemblance between signifiers (*hērōs*, *heres*, *hereditas*; *aristos*, *Ares*) and in identical meanings whose signifiers display no resemblance (*el*, *viri*). Yet Vico's effort to unearth an etymological foundation shared by all languages is itself in line with the European

tradition. It is informed by the Renaissance principle of *convenientia*, the profound similarity of words and things, which Michel Foucault described so memorably in the chapter entitled “The Prose of the World” in *The Order of Things* (Foucault 1994: 17–45). What makes Vico’s philosophical project unique is that his etymological dig is not designed to uncover a single historical language that is the progenitor of all subsequent languages. Instead, Vico is in search of what he describes as a “mental” dictionary or, as he puts it more circumspectly in the *First New Science*, a dictionary of “mental words, so to speak” (*FNS*: §387). This is what sets Vico’s project apart from coeval efforts to identify, by means of a *harmonia linguarum*, a single language (usually Hebrew) as humanity’s mother tongue.² In the *Third New Science*, Vico makes a point of distancing himself from the last well-known proponent of the harmony of languages, Thomas Hayne (§445).³ In sum, Vico distinguishes himself from his erudite contemporaries and predecessors not by the accuracy of his etymologies but by his substitution of a common mental language for the single, historical language of the *harmoniae*.

This is central to Vico’s philosophical project, since if human languages cannot be traced back to an ur-language, then no nation can claim to be the ur-people. Vico’s severing of the harmony of languages from a single historical language is at the core of his sematological critique of the ethnocentric conceit of the nations. This is why Vico has a good laugh at people like the Dutch savant Johannes Goropius Becanus (whom Leibniz also ridicules in his *New Essays on Human Understanding*) who use etymological tricks to declare that their own language is the primordial language of humanity.

But Vico’s notion of a mental and therefore nonmaterial primeval language is at odds with Hebrew, the theologically correct ur-language of most *harmoniae*. He sidesteps this not entirely harmless doctrinal problem by bifurcating human history. As we have already seen, Vico’s deconstruction of human culture applies only to the history of the gentiles who descended from Noah’s sons Ham and Japheth. Vico does not challenge the Bible’s story of the descendants of Shem, for whom Hebrew was naturally the originary language (§62). The theologically incontestable preeminence of Hebrew is stated more clearly in the *First New Science*: “Hebrew began and remained the language of a single God, whereas . . . the gentile gods proceeded to multiply . . . monstrously” (*FNS*: §303). Vico’s alternative history states that the Japhetic and Hamitic races descended into muteness and animality and had to rediscover language and their humanness. Moreover, despite the superficial differences between the various languages, they did this in similar ways, as the common mental dictionary demonstrates.

In addition to serving as evidence for humanity’s mental and sematological uniformity, the common mental dictionary provides proof of

humanity's political and juridical uniformity. Near the end of the *First New Science*, Vico demonstrates his conception of natural law *per le lingue*: by means of languages, the signifiers of legal ideas. The words of different languages all refer to the same ideas and the same human needs, which, owing to differences in climate, character, and culture, are perceived by different nations according to different properties. To the extent that words (in this case: *patres*) signify legal institutions, their uniformity also serves as evidence for the fundamental identity, universality, and “naturalness” of legal institutions that may appear different in their individual historical guises. This juridical aspect of naturalness supplements the semiotic aspect I discussed in Chapter 3. For Vico, language and law stand in a semiotic relation to one another. This semiotic relation is a natural one in the Vichian sense, as is demonstrated by *ius*, the Latin word for law. According to Vico, *ius* is identical to Jove's name (*Iovis*), which is an onomatopoeic imitation of thunder (*Ious!*). Consequently, everything Vico says about language is also, by analogy, valid for law:

- No one nation established the law for all nations.
- The first nation on earth was the Jewish nation, and what is said of it remains uncontested.
- But things happened differently with all other nations: each created its own laws.
- Nevertheless, the law of the gentiles is everywhere uniform.

The organizational structure of the *First New Science* reflects the semiotic relation between language and law. First it discusses the signifieds (the legal ideas), and then the signifiers (the languages). Axiom XIII of the 1744 edition again firmly establishes the semiotic synthesis of law and language in regard to the common dictionary and natural law. This axiom states that “[u]niform ideas originating among entire peoples unknown to each other must have a common ground of truth” (§144). Ignorant of each other's existence, the various peoples create a substantially identical law from a shared human foundation: “And the nations reach this certainty by recognizing the underlying agreements which, despite variations of detail, obtain [*convengono*] among them all in respect of this law” (§145). (It is noteworthy that here again Vico employs the verb *convenire*.) The underlying uniformity of natural law—for example, the *patres*—manifests itself in the mental dictionary: “Thence issues the mental dictionary for assigning origins to all of the diverse articulated languages. It is by means of this dictionary that the ideal eternal history is conceived” (§145).

History is conceived in signs; that is, it is “spoken” (§35). The civil world is always already sematological. Because it is eternal and ideal, history speaks the common mental language that appears in a modified form in the various concrete languages the same way that natural law appears in a

modified form in the concrete histories of the individual peoples. As with linguistic diversity, judicial diversity represents a modification of what was originally uniform. The underlying uniformity cannot be traced to a specific people (as the ethnocentric conceit of the nations would have it), but rather to a common human ground: “This same axiom does away with all the ideas hitherto held concerning the natural law of the gentes, which has been thought to have come out of one first nation and to have been received from it by others” (§146). Here Vico criticizes the Greeks and Egyptians in particular, for they scandalously considered themselves the fathers of law. It is Vico’s “constant labor,” however, to demonstrate that the

natural law of the gentes had separate origins among the several peoples, each in ignorance of the others, and it was only subsequently, as a result of wars, embassies, alliances, and commerce, that it came to be recognized as common to the entire human race.

(§146)

The mental dictionary, like natural law, is common to all humanity.

The language of this science

The fact that the mental dictionary is common to all humanity also provides the basis for answering the third question I posed at the beginning of this chapter: to what degree is the mental dictionary the language of Vico’s new science and to what degree does Vico’s science “make use of” the mental dictionary (§35)? “Making use of” has a twofold meaning.

On the one hand, Vico makes use of the common mental dictionary to prove the universal identity of the civil world. In this regard, the mental dictionary is the authority (*l'autorità*) that confirms what is said about the natural law of the gentes (§35). The *New Science* invokes this authority whenever it seeks to demonstrate that things that appear different are in fact the same. When, for example, Vico refers to the identity of the different Hercules figures created in different cultures, this constitutes making use of the mental dictionary.

On the other hand, though, Vico’s new science does not merely use the mental dictionary as the ur-language that evidences the universality of the civil world. The mental dictionary also constitutes something like the terminology of the new science; it is what ensures that the project is truly scientific. It is the new language appropriate for a new science: “This common mental language is proper to our Science” (§162). The mental dictionary is Vico’s novel response to Bacon’s critique of language, the critique of the idols of the marketplace, which spawned the Enlighten-

ment debate (to which Locke's *Essay* is the most prominent contribution) about the prejudices sedimented in language and about the so-called misuse of language. It is beyond serious doubt that Vico refers to the issues raised by Bacon, since, in addition to Plato, Tacitus, and Grotius, Bacon is one of the four authors whose work Vico continues and whose works Vico proposes to have "ever before him in meditation and in writing" (A: 139).

In the *Novum Organum*, Bacon points out that the words of natural languages harbor prejudices; that is, the meanings of words have contents that are demonstrably false:

The idols of the Marketplace are the most troublesome of all; these are idols that have crept into the understanding through the alliance of words and names. For while men believe their reason governs words, in fact, words turn back and reflect their power upon the understanding, and so render philosophy and science sophistical and inactive. For words are usually applied according to common comprehension, and divide things along lines most suited to common understanding.

(Bacon 1994: §59)

Bacon therefore proposes to unleash science on prejudice-laden words. His successors in this enterprise (Hobbes, Locke, Leibniz, and Condillac; Wilhelm Kamlah and Paul Lorenzen; the politically motivated language reformers of the French Revolution, the general semanticists, and the creators of Orwellian newspeak) have periodically made proposals for a language of truth and science. The most popular language reform proposals have sought to revise natural languages by achieving scientific objectivity about the meanings of words that denote the natural realm and explicit agreement about the meanings of words that denote the cultural realm. But there have also been isolated examples of more radical propositions that have involved the creation of a universally characteristic language.

Vico's notion of a common mental dictionary adopts Bacon's critique and at the same time subverts it. It adopts Bacon's critique by positing the particularity of each language's perspective. For Vico, the words of a particular language offer only limited points of view of an object. The dictionary subverts Bacon's critique by attempting to demonstrate that the different views of different languages are, at bottom, identical or that, on closer inspection, they highlight different aspects of the same object. Vico's notion obviously disarms Bacon's critique of the idols of the marketplace and robs it of its dramatic appeal. (In the *New Essays*, Leibniz also takes the enlightened wind out of Bacon's indignantly billowing sails.) Unlike Locke and Condillac, Vico does not choose either a language reform or a new conceptual language as the language of his science.

Because his science is not a science of the natural world, he does not suggest grounding its terms in the objectivity of nature. Nor does he propose reaching explicit agreement on the meanings of archetypal cultural concepts. Instead, Vico sets out to deconstruct words, the signifiers of the civil world. For the particularity of words—the Baconian idols or false conceptions—dissolves when their fundamental identity and universality can be proved by consulting the mental dictionary. This does not mean, though, that the individual words of a particular language are scientific terms. The scientific terms of Vico’s new science are the “mental” words of the common dictionary (in which the different words with their different perspectives necessarily participate). By thus establishing a vantage point from which to observe the underlying uniformity of the civil world (as opposed to that of the natural world), Vico’s project makes good on its claim to be a science.

Because Vico is still viewed mainly through the lens of historicism, it is important to emphasize again the universalistic bent of his thought. Although he, unlike his contemporaries, construes the civil world and not the natural world as the source of certain knowledge, this does not mean that he conceives of the historical world in the way a modern historian of ideas would. It above all does not mean that he distinguishes, in the manner of Wilhelm Dilthey, the method proper to the human sciences (which seek to understand individual historical forms) from the method proper to the natural sciences (which seek to explain natural phenomena). On the contrary, Vico upholds the traditional standards of scientific inquiry. He does not propound a hermeneutic theory of science. In the section of the *New Science* on principles, he says explicitly that the civil world is also subject to the Aristotelian definition of *scientia*. The objective of Vico’s new science is to consider “this world of nations in its eternal idea, by that property of every science, noted by Aristotle, that science has to do with what is universal and eternal” (§163). Knowledge of the civil world is certain (*certum*) because we made the civil world ourselves, in contrast to the natural world, which we did not make and which therefore only God can know. But knowledge of the civil world is only true (*verum*) to the extent that it is knowledge of what is universal and eternal—the standard of every science, including a new one.

Vico says in the same passage that the method of research appropriate to a new science of the cultural world is the one Bacon developed for the natural world. Vico’s explicit goal is to carry over (*transportare*) this method from nature to culture (which suggests that *transporto—metaphora*—is central to Vico’s conception of science, as well). He intends to examine the facts of the world of nations, “following the best ascertained method of philosophizing, that of Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, but carrying it over from the institutions of nature . . . to the civil institutions of mankind” (§163).

In contrast to a historical and hermeneutic approach, the new science seeks to arrive at universals inductively by way of empirical, historical facts. Vico is not satisfied with merely grasping particulars in either jurisprudence or sematology. The new scientist is not a philologist who lingers over historical data. Yet neither is he a philosopher who ignores empirical facts because he already knows the universals. As a modern scientist he both collects philological material and deconstructs it philosophically to reveal its ideal and eternal core. Moreover, Vico's science is new precisely because it maintains the tension between eternal properties and individual points of view.

As the language of Vico's science, the common mental dictionary is an appropriate yardstick for measuring the similarities and differences between Bacon's project and Vico's program of a new science. Vico praises Bacon as a "universal man in theory and in practice" (A: 139); he refers to Bacon's *New Organon* with the title of his own book; he describes the Baconian induction of universal and eternal laws from empirical evidence as the best scientific method; and he passionately supports Bacon's principle of "making" as the source and touchstone of scientific certainty. But Vico searches for certain knowledge not in nature but in culture. It is to culture that he applies Bacon's method, which is also reflected in the reform of natural languages in the name of the new science. Language itself (or perhaps more accurately, semiosis) is the main feature of the civil world. Vico's project is to sift through the philological material of the semiotically constituted civil world in order to learn its eternal laws, which are revealed by means of a deconstruction of language and not by means of an examination of nonlinguistic material, as befits the natural sciences. The eternal laws are the underlying mental ur-signs common to all human beings. The common mental dictionary's demonstration of the ultimate uniformity of the different points of view of the different languages renders Bacon's critique of the idols superfluous. For this reason, it also renders a reform of natural languages superfluous. Rather, the creation of the common mental dictionary, which demonstrates the identity of the different points of view, is the reform that eliminates the false conceptions of individual languages by means of universal scientific knowledge. For Vico, too, the reform of natural languages in the service of science—the construction of a scientific language—consists of assigning words meanings that are established scientifically. The common mental dictionary contains all of these scientifically established meanings. The new science does not yield scientific knowledge about anything beyond language, but about language itself. To research language, then, is simultaneously to bring about the scientific reform of language; to deconstruct signs is simultaneously to construct the language of this science (of signs).

Fifteen different points of view of human life

Of course, the universalism of Vico's language theory evidenced by the common mental dictionary does not fit very well with modern historical conceptions of language, which tend to emphasize language diversity and which sometimes embrace an extreme relativism, denying that different languages have anything in common. This is presumably why Vico scholars have had little to say about the mental dictionary. Yet the dictionary occupies precisely the same position in Vico's philosophy of language as the ideal eternal history does in his philosophy of history. The common mental dictionary is the "language spoken by the ideal eternal history" (§35). It is the ideal eternal history's semiotic counterpart. The dictionary is, consequently, the foundation and the law of historical languages. In the same way that the histories of individual nations "are traversed in time by the histories of all nations" (§35), individual languages are traversed by the common mental dictionary. This also means that despite their differences the several languages are essentially the same. For Vico, these differences are relatively superficial phenomena that amount to modifications of the same ur-word.

Vico's cultural science does not celebrate human diversity. It would never occur to Vico to marvel, as Leibniz does, at the diversity of languages as a magnificent multiplication of monadic individuals, as evidence of the "marvelous variety of [the mind's] operations" (Leibniz 1996: 337). Nor would it occur to Vico to greet, as Humboldt does, the different world-views contained in different languages as sources of cognitive richness. For Vico, diversity is a given, a reason neither for celebration nor lamentation. There is always the danger, however, that diversity will foster the ethnocentric conceit of the nations. In view of this danger, Vico's primary concern, which perhaps reflects a disenchantment with Europe's political and religious divisiveness, is to emphasize the identity that underlies difference and to reconstitute the lost catholicity of all languages.

For Vico the diversity of languages results from the diversity of climates, which gives each nation a different nature (*natura*), which, in turn, engenders different national customs (*costumi*), from which, finally, different languages arise (§445). Owing to their different natures, different nations view the same necessities of life from different points of view. Language diversity is thus the result of the different viewpoints created by different natural dispositions and social organizations. But these are different points of view of "the same utilities or necessities of human life" (§445). After briefly expressing his astonishment at the large number of languages and points of view they manifest, Vico's remarks on language diversity ultimately return to the theme of identity, for they culminate in a reference to the common mental dictionary. And for the third time in

the *Third New Science* (the first two are at §35 and §§161–2), Vico reminds the reader that in the first edition he attempted to show how the various languages could be traced back to certain common, underlying ideas. And for the third time he points out that he demonstrated this using the example of the ur-fathers and that this universal ur-idea was “considered from fifteen different points of view” by “fifteen nations ancient and modern” (§445).

Vico’s précis of chapter XLIII of the *First New Science* at §445 of the 1744 edition casts an important light on his position on historical particularity. Whereas here he speaks of fifteen points of view, fifteen nations, and fifteen words, and at §162 of “all the various languages living and dead,” at §35 Vico says that he has found “proper meanings [of terms] in fifteen different languages.” In his commentary on this passage, Nicolini (1978) rightly points out that no matter how one looks at it, the count is inaccurate. Vico lists twelve characteristics of the fathers, but only eight nations: Jews, Assyrians, Persians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Germans, and Spaniards. It is possible to arrive at ten different nations if one counts the Spartans and the new barbarians; that is, the peoples of the European Middle Ages. The German language is only mentioned in the context of *vassallus*, which, however, is not even on the list of signifiers for the fathers. It is impossible to arrive at fifteen. There are fifteen words (five of which come from Latin and five from Greek), though these fifteen words by no means cover all twelve properties. There is no signifier for the eighth property (“magnanimous hosting of vagabonds who sought refuge”). Moreover, the properties are distributed rather unevenly: “strength” has seven, “priest” has four, and “sovereign command of arms” has eleven, far more than the others. The following list of the fifteen words enumerates the properties of the fathers signified by each word according to the list in the common mental dictionary:

Hebrew: *el* (7)

Assyrian: *caldei* (4)

Persian: *maghi* (4)

Egyptian: *sacerdoti* (4)

Greek: *poiēti* (1, 3, 4), *hērōs* (2), *re* (6), *aristoi* (7), *Eraclidi* (3, 11)

Latin: *quiriti* (4, 11), *optimi* (7), *heri* (10), *viri* (2, 4, 5, 11, 12), *padri* (2)

Romance (Spanish): *varón* (9, 10).

The inaccuracy of Vico’s reference to his own previous work is interesting, since it suggests that he does not attach all that much importance to the exact documentation of historical facts. He is just as careless in his use of Greek and Roman myths as he is in the documentation of his own life and work. I already noted this in regard to the incorrect year of birth that Vico assigns himself in the *Autobiography*. This insouciant approach to

historical data suggests to me that Vico is not concerned with particulars, but rather with the universals that are inferred from particulars. It demonstrates how unhistorical Vico's concept of history is, how unphilological his sematology, and how unrelativistic his concept of language.

As the example of the fathers makes evident, what is common about the mental dictionary is not that all nations signify all the eternal properties of the mental idea and that all have the same image of it. The word common merely refers to the fact that all nations share "identical human necessities and utilities" (*FNS*: §387) or, put in more modern terms, universal functions. Staying with the example of the fathers, what all nations have in common is an ur-father and the need to signify him. How a nation signifies its own ur-father, however, depends on its particular point of view. The common mental dictionary collects the different points of view and combines them in an overall myth to which all languages contribute. The common mental dictionary is not an abstract concept, but rather a structural universal derived from historical and empirical research, a universal that comprises and retains all of its historical facets.

By exemplifying the characteristically Vichian notion of concrete universals, the common mental dictionary makes abundantly clear what Vico's new science intends to achieve by combining philosophy and philology. Philosophy studies the different signs collected by philology in order to learn their universal functions. The signs retain their particularity, however, because the individual myths are retained in the common myth and not lost as they would be in an abstract concept.

Cheerful and unutterable

Glücklich, die wissen, daß hinter allen
Sprachen das Unsägliche steht;
Daß, von dort her, ins Wohlgefallen
Größe zu uns übergeht!

Unabhängig von diesen Brücken,
die wir mit Verschiedenem baun:
so daß wir immer, aus jedem Entzücken
in ein heiter Gemeinsames schau'n.

Rainer Maria Rilke

By means of the common mental dictionary Vico attempts to deconstruct what Rilke calls the "cheerful commonality" (*heiter Gemeinsames*) of languages. To the degree that it is not "unutterable" (*unsäglich*), this commonality is in a certain way more cheerful for Vico than it is for Rilke. What is common is what is said by all nations and therefore what can be said by all peoples, even if a particular nation does not say all that can be

said. For Vico, the cheerful commonality resides within languages and not behind them. Rilke's bridges built with the materials of difference ("Brücken,/die wir mit Verschiedenem baun") are for Vico constructed of the same material. That is why they bridge wider gaps than the ones Rilke is alluding to, the gap between speakers and listeners of the same language. They span the divide between different languages and between the present and the past. The new science is a science of bridges that reach over the gaps between now and then, between here and there, between this language and another language, and between all languages and the common language. Vico's sematology, which culminates in the common mental dictionary, is indeed a philosophy of the cheerful commonality that bridges the gaps riven by ethnocentric conceit.

Vico's is a very optimistic science, as yet untroubled by the experience of truly radical cultural and linguistic otherness. Vico's cultural and especially linguistic experience is essentially limited to an italo-centric Latin heritage supplemented by classical Greek. It assumes two and a half millennia of continuity from the Homeric poems to the eighteenth century. The most exotic people of which Vico has fairly solid knowledge are the Germans described by Tacitus. But he knows nothing of their language, as he knows nothing of the languages of Native Americans, whom he also names as evidence for global cultural uniformity. This is hardly surprising, since Europeans first become aware of the true Babelian diversity of languages during the course of the eighteenth century. Being confronted with such a vast number of very different languages and cultures might disturb Vico's European and catholic cheerfulness such that the only commonality that remains is the unutterable that lies behind all languages.

But Rilke nevertheless calls it a "cheerful" commonality that transmits "greatness" (*Größe*) to us. The poem's optimism is an expression of thanks to Witold Hulewicz, Rilke's Polish translator, who had recently succeeded in rendering the unutterable into another language, thereby demonstrating the cheerful commonality. Others doubt and even despair whether languages, in view of their profound differences, have anything in common. Whorfian linguistic relativism takes this doubt to such an extreme that it gainsays the existence of any commonality across languages. For a radical linguistic relativist, commonality is truly unutterable. In contrast to the complete rejection of the notion of shared traits, Rilke is doubtless correct that there is something in common behind all languages. Linguists call this something "universals."

Modern linguistic universals obviously do not constitute a Vichian super-myth that individual languages then retell according to their respective points of view. Linguistic universals are not content, and they do not constitute a collection of semantic properties, as in Vico's example of the mental words for ur-father. But they do constitute the human conditions of the possibility of speaking, conditions that result from the

same universal necessities. To this extent contemporary research on universal grammar shares Vico's approach of using the evidence provided by concrete languages to arrive at what is common to them all. What is "common to the entire human race" can keep us from despairing over our imprisonment in a single language and is, for this reason, uncommonly cheerful.

TO SPEAK BY WRITING (DERRIDA–ROUSSEAU)

The next two chapters on the semiogenetic twins, writing and speech, address the materiality of semiosis. In contrast to the preceding chapters, which consisted mainly of close readings of Vichian texts, this chapter and the next three cast a wider net and include interpretations of Vico and comparisons of Vico with other authors. This chapter deals with Jacques Derrida's reading of Vico and a comparison of Vico and Rousseau. In Chapter 6, the focus shifts to Vico and Herder. Chapter 7 brings Vico's theory of memory into contact with Hegel's and with the current debate on memory. Chapter 8 is a comparative study of Vico and Humboldt.

We are in the middle of, or perhaps have already traversed, the most significant medial and cultural revolution since the invention of the printing press. The materiality of communication and cognition have become hotly debated topics. Apocalyptists such as André Leroi-Gourhan, Günter Anders, and Neil Postman have decried the stultifying effects of television and have predicted that an image-driven world will lose touch with writing and perhaps even with speech.¹ One of the most important voices in the discussion on the mediality of semiosis belongs to Derrida. Put simply, Derrida accuses occidental philosophy since Plato of phonocentrism; of propagating an ideology of the voice, sound, and communicative and cognitive proximity; and of repressing writing as a secondary and supplementary form of semiosis.

With all of Western philosophy under the suspicion of phonocentrism, Vico occupies an intriguing position. Unlike the phonocentric mainstream (if there is one), Vico posits the twin birth of speech and writing, voice and gesture, *vox* and *actio*.² In fact, he declares that writing was the first born of the pair, thereby according it at least temporal primacy. Hardly any other philosopher of the past would make a better compatriot for Derrida than Vico.³ Vico's critique of the West's two conceits that are phonocentrism's partners in crime—the logocentric conceit of the scholars and the ethnocentric conceit of the nations—makes him an ideal ally for a grammatologist. This chapter describes how Derrida misses the opportunity to establish a European tradition for his project. It also serves

as a case study, though admittedly an extreme one, of how Vico is usually read: as a forerunner of a later philosopher (in this case, Rousseau) and not as a philosopher in his own right.

À la recherche de Jean-Baptiste

The first chapter of Part II in *Of Grammatology* deals with Lévi-Strauss's Rousseauism. Here, Derrida names Vico as one of the philosophers who advance the notion of an originary poetic language. But unlike Rousseau, Vico imagines the origin to have been divine:

Moreover, Vico is one of the rare believers, if not the only believer, in the contemporaneity of origin between writing and speech: "Philosophers have believed that among the nations languages first came into being and then letters; whereas . . . languages and letters were born twins and proceeded apace through all their three stages" (*Scienza Nuova* 3, I).

(Derrida 1998: 335)

This remark, which appears in an endnote (in a footnote in the original French edition), suggests that Derrida considers Vico to be an important author. After all, as one of the rare believers, if not the only believer, in the simultaneity of writing and speech, Vico adumbrates one of the key facets of the Derridean critique of occidental logocentrism and phonocentrism. The recurrence of Vico's name in other parts of the *Grammatology*, especially in the chapter on Rousseau's theory of writing, appears to confirm Vico's significance for Derrida.

In the third chapter of Part II, Derrida announces that he intends to compare Rousseau's notion of the original unity of song and language with Vico's statements on the subject: "We shall have to relate these propositions to analogous ones, those of Vico for example" (Derrida 1998: 215). As promised, in an endnote to the fourth chapter of Part II, Derrida quotes Vico on the poetic origin of language and on the three stages of language development: the divine-hieroglyphic, the heroic-symbolic, and the human-epistolary (Derrida 1998: 349–50). Derrida points out that Warburton held a different view of the originary metaphor than did Vico, Rousseau, and Condillac (Derrida 1998: 272–3). He refers, in another endnote, to Vico's theory that the poetic characters exaggerate the size of gods and heroes (Derrida 1998: 351). He contrasts Vico's theory of the developmental sequence of grammatical categories with Rousseau's (Derrida 1998: 279). The circular nature of history in Rousseau reminds him of Vico's notion of *ricorsi* (Derrida 1998: 298). Finally, Derrida cites Vico's three stages of the development of writing. Vico is, in sum, present throughout the chapter.

Vico's main role, however, is to serve as Rousseau's predecessor. Indeed, it is only after a good deal of toing and froing between the main text and the endnotes—where, as I noted already, many of Derrida's references to Vico are to be found—that Vico begins to emerge as Rousseau's intellectual antipode, as a thinker who posits the simultaneous origin of writing and speech and resists the subjugation and subordination of writing that, according to Derrida, reaches its pinnacle in Rousseau, Hegel, and Saussure. Derrida took note of Vico's antiphonocentric stance in chapter three. How is it, then, that in chapter four he seems to forget Vico's status as one of the rare believers? To answer this question we must return to the *New Science*.

Here, however, we run into unexpected difficulties. A reader who learns about the Vichian thesis of the twin birth and parallel development of speech and writing in the *Grammatology* might have a hard time locating the corresponding passages in *The New Science*. What does Derrida mean by the reference “*Scienza Nuova* 3, I”? Does he mean the first chapter of Book III (which would normally be cited as “III, I”)? Yet Book III deals with the discovery of the True Homer and not with speech and writing. This in itself need not mean much; the *New Science* is nothing if not repetitive, and thematically related statements are strewn throughout the entire text. But you won't find the passage Derrida cites in Book III of the *New Science*. It is from the introduction:

We shall observe that the unhappy cause of this effect [that only “monstrous opinions” about the origin of language and writing have been held up until now] is that philologists have believed that among the nations languages first came into being and then letters; whereas . . . letters and languages were born twins and proceeded apace through all their three stages.

(§33)

It is still not clear, however, whether this is the right passage. In the French edition of Derrida's book, it is philosophers and not philologists who hold monstrous opinions regarding the first-born of languages. But this might merely be one of Vico's slightly reformulated recapitulations. For example, Vico states elsewhere that all scholars assumed that speech and writing had separate origins (§429) and that “the philosophers and the philologians” should be guided by the correct principle of their common origin (§431). It is quite possible, in other words, that the same formulation would refer in one passage to philosophers and in another to philologists. But there is no other passage. Derrida's citation manifestly comes from §33 of the *New Science*, though he substitutes philosophers for philologists.⁴ This does not become certain, however, until the name of the French translator of Vico, Chaix-Ruy, pops up in the second

Vico quotation (Derrida 1998: 349–50). Along with confusing philosophers with philologists, Derrida neglects to provide a complete reference. But a little bibliographic spadework reveals that he is probably quoting from Jules Chaix-Ruy's 1946 anthology, *J.-B. Vico. Oeuvres choisies*, a translation based on Nicolini's 1928 two-volume edition of Vico's writings. It turns out that "3, I" means the *third* or 1744 edition of the *New Science*, volume *one*. The complete quotation in Chaix-Ruy runs as follows:

Les philologues ont cru, bien à tort, que les langues sont nées d'abord, et plus tard l'écriture; bien au contraire elles naquirent jumelles et cheminèrent parallèlement, suivant la loi même des trois états que nous avons formulée et qui vaut pour les unes comme pour les autres.

(Vico 1946: 82)

The quotation corresponds to page 28 of the Nicolini edition, where we find §33 and the philologists who propounded the erroneous theory of the separate origins of language and writing.

The difficulties in getting from Derrida's quotations to Vico's text are noteworthy, not because of Derrida's disregard for philological detail or because the forgotten philologists are eager for revenge. The fact that Derrida covers his tracks is interesting because it is emblematic of how he deals with Vico. By misplacing the key that could grant access to Vico's work, he makes it difficult for others (and for himself) to confront Vico's theory. The Vico who should be important for Derrida's own philosophical project—the antiphonocentric and antilogocentric Vico, whom we might call the True Vico—increasingly eludes Derrida and morphs into another philosopher; namely, Rousseau. Finally, a foreign text completely masks the True Vico. It seems that Derrida unconsciously resists giving the antilogocentric, grammatological tradition of European thought its due. It is buried in the footnotes of the French edition and exiled to the endnotes of the English edition. We will now follow Vico into exile.

By nature conjoined

If my reconstruction is correct, Derrida either quotes from or refers to the following paragraphs of the *Third New Science* in the endnotes of the *Grammatology*: §§32, 33, 34, 299–30, 401, 435, 438, 446, 472, 816, and 935, as well as to pages 174 and 194 of the 1931 Nicolini edition of the *First New Science*.⁵ The passages from the *Third New Science* comprise the four sections that treat the issue of speech and writing: namely, the explanation of the frontispiece (§§21–3, §§32–5), the Principles (particularly axioms

LVI–LXII: §§224–35), the Poetic Logic (especially its fourth and fifth chapters: §§428–72), and Book IV (§§928–36). What follows is a reconstruction of the relation between speech and writing based on the Vico passages referred to by Derrida. As this précis will necessarily rehearse some of the material I have already discussed in Chapters 1–4, readers may choose to go directly to page 88, where my reading of Derrida continues with the section entitled “Vico vanishes.”

Vico places enormous importance on the assertion that spoken language and writing essentially belonged together from the beginning: “the two were by nature conjoined” (§429). In fact, Vico privileges writing over speech: “all the nations began to speak by writing [*parlare scrivendo*]” (§429). The curious locution *parlare scrivendo* combines two different aspects of semiosis. *Parlare* designates the functional side (communication), and *scrivere* the material side (medium) of semiosis. For Vico, *parlare* means “to communicate,” “to transmit signs to someone,” regardless of the medium. It corresponds to Vico’s broader use of the term *lingua*. *Scrivere* means “to produce visual signs” and is independent of any previously existing word language and is not restricted to the hand. The entire body and the physical objects themselves can be sites of writing. Vico considers the twin birth of *lingue e lettere* to be his own particular discovery, and he emphatically holds it up against all of the other scholars who have maintained that language predates writing (§33, §§428–31).

In the beginning, to speak by writing consists of the creation of poetic characters by animalistic human beings governed by their imaginations. Vico presents this notion of the origin of human culture as his own hard-won discovery and as the master key to his new science:

We find that the principle of these origins of both languages and letters lies in the fact that the gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters. This discovery, which is the master key of this Science, has cost us the persistence of almost all of our literary life.

(§34)

Vico clearly distances his discovery from the Bible’s account of language origin and from Plato’s *Cratylus*:

For that first language, spoken by the theological poets, was not a language in accord with the nature of the things it dealt with (as must have been the sacred language invented by Adam, to whom God granted divine onomathesia, the giving of names according to the nature of each), but was a fantastic speech making use of physical substances endowed with life and most of them imagined to be divine.

(§401)

Man is not primarily an *animal rationale*, but rather an *animal imaginativum*. Nor is he primarily *zōon logoon ēkhon* (at least he is not endowed with the rational *logos* of the European tradition), but rather is an inventor of myths, fables, and animistic ideas who expresses them with his entire body or discovers them in the objects themselves. He is an *animal poeticum* who attains to reason, *logos*, arbitrary signs, voice, and prose during the course of a long historical process:

All that has here been reasoned out seems clearly to confute the common error of the grammarians, who say that prose speech came first and speech in verse afterward. And within the origins of poetry, as they have been here disclosed, we have found the origins of languages and letters.

(§472)

Vico's theory of three languages and forms of writing traces the progress of this ascent (and it is important to remember that it is an ascent). Despite the many similarities between Vico's and Rousseau's theories of language origin, which seem to make it probable that Vico was a source of inspiration for Rousseau, Vico is really an anti-Rousseau. For Vico considers his own, civilized era—not prehistoric times, the Middle Ages, the old Germanic tribes, or Native Americans—to be the better one.

“In harmony with these three kinds of nature and government, *three kinds of language were spoken* which compose the vocabulary of this Science” (§32). The twin sisters, language and writing, traverse together the stages of hieroglyphic, symbolic, and epistolary language. The hieroglyphic, holy language is characterized by mute, visual semiosis. More exactly, it consists of the poetic characters expressed by means of gestures or the physical objects themselves:

The first kind of language was of the time of the families when gentile men were newly received into humanity. This, we shall find, was a mute language of signs and physical objects having natural relations to the ideas they wished to express.

(§32)

In northern France there was a hieroglyphic speech called rebus of Picardy, which must have been, as in Germany, a speech by physical things.

(§435)

The symbolic, martial language of the second stage is also for the most part characterized by mute and visual semiosis in the form of *sēmata*:

The second kind of language was spoken by means of heroic emblems or similitudes, comparisons, images, metaphors, and natural descriptions, which make up the great body of the heroic language which was spoken at the time the heroes reigned.

(§32)

*the heroic emblems, which must have been the mute comparisons which Homer calls *sēmata* (the signs in which the heroes wrote).*

(§438)

The epistolary, human language intended for everyday use (and no longer for religious or military purposes) is the first language that is not mute. It is an articulated, conventional language consisting of words: “*The third kind of language is human language using words agreed upon by the people, a language of which they are absolute lords*” (§32).

The epistolary language consists of vulgar characters (letters) that were invented by ingeniously reducing hieroglyphic symbols (§935), just as the words of the epistolary language were created by reducing symbolic pictures. It should be noted, however, that, in his explanation of the frontispiece, in which a tablet inscribed with an alphabet is shown resting on a Corinthian column, Vico states that the invention of letters occurs long after the invention of epistolary word language: “This tablet symbolizes the origin of languages and letters that are called vulgar. These are found to have come into being a long time after the founding of the nations, and letters much later than languages” (§21).

As we have seen, Vico supplements the diachronic sequence of hieroglyphic, symbolic, and epistolary language with a synchronic comparison of the language of the gods, heroes, and men. This comparison results in the following relationship between articulate and mute expression:

*The language of the gods was almost entirely mute, only very slightly articulate; the language of heroes, an equal mixture of articulate and mute, and consequently of vulgar speech and of the heroic characters used in writing by the heroes, which Homer called *sēmata*; the language of man, almost entirely articulate and very slightly mute, there being no vulgar language so copious that there are not more things than it has words for.*

(§446)

Following this synchronic comparison of the respective media of the language of the gods, heroes, and mankind, Vico singles out articulation and traces its development. He lays out a diachrony of articulate language according to which it progresses through hieroglyphic-divine, symbolic-heroic, and epistolary-human stages. Onomatopoeia originates at the

same time as divine characters, and both depict the natural phenomena that are taken to be gods. Interjections seem to be the heroic form of articulate language; they no longer depict divine natural phenomena directly (as did onomatopoeia), but rather “give vent to one’s own passions” (§447). Onomatopoeia and interjections represent the sounds produced by mute humans who overcome their silence by singing:

Mutes utter formless sounds by singing, and stammerers by singing teach their tongues to pronounce. *Men vent great passions by breaking into song. . . . [T]he founders of the gentile states . . . were inexpressive save under the impulse of violent passions, and formed their first languages by singing.*

(§§228–30)

Lastly, pronouns are the first words of epistolary language, since they no longer serve as onomatopoeic icons of self-expression, but rather are used to share “our ideas with others, concerning things which we cannot name or whose names another may not yet understand” (§450). As articulated language gradually develops, pronouns are followed by prepositions, nouns, and verbs.

Vico vanishes

The preceding section was based almost exclusively on passages cited by Derrida (the portions of the above quotations printed in italics). The only Vico passage from the *Grammatology* that I excluded is §816, which deals with the alteration of perception that occurs when primitive humans create poetic characters and is not directly related to my discussion of *parlare scrivendo*. On the basis of the above quotations, it is apparent that Derrida could have acquired an accurate picture of Vico’s language theory. But instead, Vico gradually vanishes from the three endnotes in which Derrida cites him.

With Rousseau as his starting point, Derrida appropriately begins his references to Vico with the master key of Vico’s work, the poetic origin of language. There are certainly enough parallels between Vico and Rousseau’s conceptions of the early stages of language to justify the overall claim that “Rousseau and Vico both affirm the metaphoric nature of primitive languages” (Derrida 1998: 335). But Derrida’s next assertion is inaccurate: “Vico alone attributes to them this divine origin, also the theme of disagreement between Condillac and Rousseau” (Derrida 1998: 335). While language origin is indeed divine from Vico’s perspective, as we saw in Chapter 3 it is divine in an unconventional sense. When Vico refers to the divine (or holy) hieroglyphic language of the origin, he precisely does not mean that this language was God’s gift to men but that it was the “men

who imagined the gods" (§446). The gods *are* the language created by primitive humans. Vico draws a sharp distinction between the poetic (and theogonic) origins of the languages of the *gentes* and the divine language origin of the Judeo-Christian tradition, whose first language was a "sacred language invented by Adam, to whom God granted divine onomathesia" (§401). The *New Science* does not question the divine origins of Adamic language or biblical revelation. Unlike Condillac, Vico does not attempt to mediate between the Bible and his new science (Condillac 2001: 113). It is the bifurcation of human history that makes possible Vico's intellectual boldness. When Vico states, in the famous passage that Derrida also quotes, that the discovery of the master key of the *New Science* cost him his entire literary life, this doubtless also refers to the exertion that was required to free himself intellectually from the massive weight of the Christian tradition. Although Vico's own faith may remain unshaken, his liberation from the Judeo-Greco-Christian mainstream was essential for the founding of a new science. Derrida, though, does not mean the divine origin of Adamic language (which Vico does not contest) when he asserts that Vico considered the origin of poetic language to be divine. He can't mean it, since Vico's reference to Adamic language has been excised from the Chaix-Ruy French translation that Derrida consults. In effect, Derrida's disregard for Vico's bifurcation of history bars him access to Vico's unconventional, grammatological insights. The *New Science* puts the grand narrative of the Judeo-Christian tradition under erasure. Derrida, however, fails to appreciate the post-occidental, deconstructive gesture of Vico's project.

Derrida then addresses Vico's theory of the twin birth and parallel development of speech and writing. One might have expected this founding principle of the antiphonocentric position to be decisive for Derrida's reading of Vico. But the reference to Ernst Cassirer at the end of the endnote indicates that Derrida is on the wrong track: "Cassirer does not hesitate to affirm that Rousseau has 'summarized' in the *Essay* Vico's theories on language" (Derrida 1998: 334–5). Cassirer does indeed write that it is "no accident that Rousseau should have been first to take up this theory and attempt to develop it in detail" (Cassirer 1953: 150). If Rousseau does take up Vico's theory (for which there is some evidence), he does not merely develop it, he subverts key aspects of it. Because Derrida accepts Cassirer's one-sided thesis, from the beginning his focus is on the parallels, and not the differences, between Vico and Rousseau.

Derrida's position becomes fully apparent in the long endnote 2 on pages 349 and 350. The starting point is again Rousseau's contention that the "first language had to be figurative" (R/H: 45). The endnote documents Vico's discovery of the poetic origin of language and notes the parallels between Vico and Rousseau's descriptions of the stages of language development: "The distinction among three languages would correspond,

mutatis mutandis, to Rousseau's schema" (Derrida 1998: 349). *Mutatis mutandis* there is indeed a certain correspondence between Vico's tripartite model and Rousseau's schema. But there are also important differences in detail and particularly in the overall meaning of the three stages.

We can already see from the next sentence that there are actually fewer parallels than originally announced: "The second language, would, strictly speaking, be the moment of origin, when the poetic song is not yet broken into articulation and convention" (Derrida 1998: 349). This is true of Rousseau's second language, but not of Vico's. As we have seen, Vico also conceives the language of the second stage of human development as a language of metaphors. It does not, however, mark the advent of speech (*parole*) and is therefore not the origin of articulate language. First, *lingua articulata* begins with the onomatopoeia of the first stage of Vico's developmental model (§447). Second, the sounds produced at the second stage have neither the function nor the importance of speech in Rousseau's sense. They are neither archaic song nor Arcadian love calls like Rousseau's "Love me" (R/H: 47). The interjections of heroic language, the "sounds articulated under the impetus of violent passions" (§448), are clearly shouts or cries and are primarily non-communicative expressions of feeling: "Interjections give vent to one's own passions, a thing which one can do even by oneself" (§450). Articulate poetic speech comprises only half of the heroic semiosis of the second stage; the heroic emblems (*sēmata*) constitute the other half. But in order really to be considered speech, poetic locutions would have to be condensed into words (*accorciati*). In short, viewing the second stage as the real origin of speech in Vico's model is problematic from several perspectives. It would actually make more sense to locate the origin of speech in the third phase of Vico's developmental scheme, since it is not until this phase that semiosis becomes communicative and the voice the dominant medium.

Moreover, Derrida incorrectly assumes that Rousseau and Vico have identical notions of articulation. For Vico, articulate primarily means vocal as opposed to mute. Rousseau's notion of articulation refers to the destruction of the beautiful, purely vocalic song of the origin by means of the "intentional modification of the tongue and palate" (R/H: 49). It is thus linked to consonants and to the languages of the North, the "sad daughters of necessity" (R/H: 129). In my opinion, Vico's term "pronounce [*prononziare*]" (§§228 and 462) corresponds more closely to Rousseau's concept of articulation.

Nevertheless, Derrida is correct to say that Vico also conceives of the final stage of language development as fully articulate: "For Vico, as for Rousseau, the progress of language follows the progress of articulation" (Derrida 1998: 350). But for Vico, articulation does not represent post-lapsarian perversion of the beautiful love lays of the origin (a distinction that also underscores the fundamental differences between Vico and

Rousseau's philosophies of history). Instead, Vico's notion of articulation is a concomitant of and a prerequisite for humanity's emergence from theocratic and feudal tutelage into a civilized world. There *are* parallels between the humanization processes envisioned by Vico and Rousseau. But the following statement does not hold for Vico: "Thus, language suffers a fall and humanizes itself through the loss of poetry and its divine character" (Derrida 1998: 350). If Rousseau was indeed familiar with the *New Science*, then he turned its meaning on its head. For the humanization of language is the outcome of a developmental process, an outcome that Vico emphatically welcomes. This becomes clear in the passage from the introduction to the *New Science* that Derrida quotes, but whose meaning is not fathomable in Chaix-Ruy's French: "la troisième fut la langue humaine composée de vocables établis par les peuples, de mots dont ils peuvent fixer la sens à leur gré." But Vico actually says the following: "Human language, using words agreed upon by the people, a language of which they are absolute lords [*la lingua umana per voci conventute da' popoli, della quale sono assoluti signori i popoli*]" (§32). The rest of the passage confirms that this is as political as it sounds and that Vico views the third stage as a political liberation from theocratic and feudal domination. Human language is the semiotic system that corresponds to a human political and legal order: "the third, human language is proper to the popular commonwealths and monarchical states; a language whereby the people may fix the meaning of the laws by which the nobles as well as the plebes are bound" (§32).

A third lengthy endnote discusses the parallels between the three stages of writing in Rousseau and Vico's theories (Derrida 1998: 352–3). Once again, the alleged parallels are extremely problematic. Moreover, the endnote completely ignores Vico's text and thus documents Derrida's repression of the Vichian "speaking by writing." Vico's *écriture*, it seems, does not fit into Derrida's neat history of philosophy.

Rousseau characterizes the achievements of the three stages of writing as "painting the objects themselves," "representing the word," "and decomposing the speaking voice" (R/H: 57). Whereas for Rousseau writing depicts speech at the second stage, for Vico the first two stages of the development of speech and writing are semiotic systems in their own right and have nothing to do with articulate speech. This is why the second stage's "speaking by writing" is not a representation of word language (which does not exist yet), but rather a visual repertoire of signs that Vico calls *semata*. In other words, both the hieroglyphic and symbolic languages correspond to Rousseau's first stage: "painting the objects themselves." As conventional representations of words, Chinese characters belong, according to Rousseau, to the second stage. Vico, by contrast, views them as hieroglyphs independent of word language and assigns them to the first stage of his diachrony (§435).

Derrida completely disregards the fact that Vico's model, unlike conventional historical schemas, emphasizes precisely the parallel development of speech and writing. Derrida doubtless received impetus for separating speech and writing from Chaix-Ruy's anthology, which injudiciously divides Vico's reflections into two sections, one on language (Vico 1946: 75–82) and one on writing (Vico 1946: 82–7). But Vico's text mends the French translator's bisection with its obstinate insistence on the unity of speech and writing: when Chaix-Ruy tries to document a "seconde forme d'écriture," the corresponding Vico text talks about a "second kind of speech [*secondo parlare*]" (§438). Only in Book IV of the *Third New Science*, which summarizes the tripartite schema underlying world history, does Vico—for didactic reasons—discuss language and writing separately. And here, it is worth noting, Vico's summary of the development of writing (characters) is considerably longer and more detailed than his recapitulation of the three kinds of language.

By now, though, Derrida has long since wandered from Vico's text. He does quote Vico's remarks on the heroic *sēmata* from §438. Otherwise, all of the passages Derrida cites as Vico quotations are in fact Chaix-Ruy's explanatory remarks. To make matters worse, Chaix-Ruy's terminology—"spontaneously," "ideographic," "alphabetic writing"—is decidedly un-Vichian: "La première écriture est idéographique ou hiéroglyphique: elle est née spontanément, et ne tire nullement son origine de conventions" (Vico 1946: 85). "La seconde forme d'écriture est également toute spontanée: c'est l'écriture symbolique ou par emblèmes héroïques" (Vico 1946: 86). "Troisième forme d'écriture: l'écriture alphabétique" (Vico 1946: 87). Vico's text is referred to only by (not quite correct) page numbers. For the record, Chaix-Ruy's paraphrases correspond roughly to §§435, 438, and 935 of the *Third New Science*.

In sum, my deconstruction of Derrida's reading of Vico documents a process of repression. The author of the *Grammatology* invokes the very philosopher in the European tradition who most clearly foreshadows aspects of his own critique of logocentrism. But instead of enshrining Vico as a forerunner of his own critique, Derrida banishes Vico's text to the notes, where it is equated with and subsumed under Rousseau's text on language origin. In the end, Derrida no longer even allows Vico to speak—or write—for himself. Derrida's book treats Vico the way Derrida says Western metaphysics treats writing: "debased, lateralized, repressed, displaced, yet exercising a permanent and obsessive pressure from the place where it remains held in check" (Derrida 1998: 270). With this chapter, I hope to have relived some of the permanent and obsessive pressure that Vico's *New Science* exerts on Derrida's *Grammatology* from its endnote exile.

TO SPEAK BY SINGING (HERDER)

According to Vico, speech (*lingua articulata*) is writing's second-born twin. At first the weaker mode of semiosis, speech ultimately becomes the powerful voice (*vox*) that dominates the human age. Vico imagines that in the beginning speech was a sort of song. The first humans "speak by singing" (§462). But to a greater degree than Vico or even Rousseau (whose essay on language origin appeared posthumously in 1781, had a very limited reception, and has only really begun to be studied again in the wake of Derrida's discussion of it in *Of Grammatology*), Johann Gottfried Herder is the eighteenth-century figure most often associated with the theory that speech has its origin in song. Herder even coined a term—*Sprachsingen* (sung language)—that corresponds to Vico's locution *parlare cantando*, a coincidence that in itself invites a comparative study.

Yet there would seem to be more significant parallels between Vico and Herder than the notion of *Sprachsingen*. Erich Auerbach (1932), Karl-Otto Apel (1980), Valerio Verra (1968), George A. Wells (1969), Isaiah Berlin (1976), and Wolfgang Proß (1987) have discerned numerous important similarities. In fact, Berlin's *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas*, is one of the best-known books about Vico (and was reissued in 2000, together with Berlin's short study of Hamann, as *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*). Unlike in the case of Vico and Rousseau, any parallels between Vico and Herder are not the result of a direct influence. If Herder did read Vico it was very late in his life and had no discernible effect. Most comparisons of Vico and Herder are made with an eye toward their philosophies of history. They tend, like Derrida's remarks on Vico and Rousseau, to view Vico as a brilliant but hapless forerunner of a subsequent, more influential theorist. My comparative study will depart from both of these trends. First, I intend to discuss Vico's and Herder's philosophies of language rather than their philosophies of history. Second, I shall concentrate on teasing out the differences between the two thinkers rather than identifying the similarities.

Every comparison is based on an identity. The one I have chosen—song as the origin of speech—is neither exclusively Vichian nor Herderian, but

a fairly common feature of the eighteenth-century discourse on language. It is for this reason a particularly apt yardstick with which to measure the differences between Vico and Herder's positions. Because the eighteenth-century European language debate largely revolves around the same issues, Sylvain Auroux has proposed isolating certain key discursive elements and making them the subject of a "serial history" (Auroux *et al.* 1981). The idea is that an author's stance on a certain problem will emerge with greater clarity from a serial history than from an examination of the problem within the context of his or her entire oeuvre. The topos that language has its origins in singing is a discursive element that lends itself well to such a study. Indeed, its seriality was already perceived by the participants in the debate (for example, Condillac and Herder). An exhaustive serial study is beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, I shall attempt to integrate my comparison of Vico and Herder into a cursory series that also includes two of the most important eighteenth-century language theorists, Condillac and Rousseau.

Singing → speaking → writing

The convergence of two traditions from antiquity—one associated with Strabo, the other with Aristotle—has resulted in theories that posit the following developmental sequence for the earliest stages of language formation: human beings first sang, then spoke, then wrote.¹ The first pair, singing → speaking, is the Strabo pair. The second, speaking → writing, is the Aristotelian pair. Singing → speaking → writing is something like the standard sematogenetic sequence of human language development. Most eighteenth-century theorists refer to it in one way or another.

1744: Vico

Vico, chronologically the first major eighteenth-century philosopher to write about the origin of language, explicitly rejects the Aristotelian pair: first speech, then writing. As we have seen, he considers this to be one of the "extravagant and monstrous opinions that have been held up to now" (§33). For him, writing came first: "all nations began to speak by writing" (§429). But this does not constitute a simple reversal of the traditional sequence; it does not mean, then, that writing gave birth to speech. Instead, Vico transforms the diachronic pair into a synchronic pair: "letters and languages were born twins and they proceeded apace through all their three stages" (§33). Writing is only the first-born and bigger of the sematological twin sisters.

But what about singing, the first chapter of the standard sematogenetic story? Here, Vico agrees with the Western tradition: "languages began with

song [*le lingue incominciaron dal canto*]” (§462). This does not mean, however, that one of the twins (*lingue*) had its own father (*canto*), but rather that this twin is itself song; in other words, writing’s twin is not speech, but song (or rather: sung language). In the same way that the first form of writing is not writing in the narrow sense of letters and characters but what Vico calls “acts and objects” (§34), the articulate language of the origin is not a language consisting of words, but song. The sematogenetic twins *atti/corpi* and *canto* do not become letters and speech until they reach adulthood. Acts and objects become letters. Song becomes speech.

1746: Condillac

Two years after the printing of the *Third New Science*, Condillac’s *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines* (*Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*) is published. It is the most important text for the continental European discourse on language theory and epistemology in the eighteenth century. For Condillac, the first language is a “language of action [*langage d’action*]” (Condillac 2001: 115). Condillac, we note, uses the same conventional philosophical terms as Vico: *actio*, *actus*. Actions are bodily gestures that express subjective mental states that Condillac calls “passions,” by which he means sensations of bodily needs (primarily hunger and thirst). The language of action can manifest itself as “cries of the passions” (Condillac 2001: 115). For Condillac, too, *action* and *cri* are semiogenetic siblings, though he does not establish a hierarchy between them. That said, Condillac does not toe the traditional line on the matter of the first sounds produced by humans and states unambiguously that it would be inaccurate to describe these passionate outcries as “chant” (Condillac 2001: 211).² Condillac is equally disinclined to refer to visual gestures—the “actions”—as writing. In subsequent developmental stages, passionate cries are tamed by the will and become conventional and articulate speech, the condition of possibility for the development of the human mental faculties. It is only later that speech is written down.

Condillac’s position appears to be very close to Vico’s. Yet there are important dissimilarities that give Condillac’s sematogenetic story a different overall meaning. Condillac’s rejection of the appellation “chant” for the cries of the passions suggests that the brutish origins of humanity are not to his taste or that he does not recognize the poetic and esthetic aspects of ur-semiosis. The main difference, however, has to do with the site of sematogenesis and its theological and political implications. Ordinary ebullitions à la Condillac do not constitute semantic activity. They are not sound images that depict natural forces and thereby create the deities that are the foundation of the civil world. Unlike Vico’s model, these sounds have nothing to do with representing the world. For Condillac, the first “word” is an outburst that expresses a subjective, physical sensation (like hunger or thirst) and is pragmatic (since it solicits help from others).

But there are no poets at Condillac's origin, only animals that communicate with one another, animals that ascend to humanness by taming and habitualizing their bodily movements and outcries. Condillac's story celebrates this developmental sequence as progress. In contradistinction to Condillac's optimism, Vico's philosophical purpose is to remind his enlightened contemporaries that words still have a songful substratum that is indicative of humanity's savage, poetic origins.

1750s: Rousseau

No eighteenth-century theorist attaches greater significance to primordial song than does Rousseau—not even Herder, whose theory of *Sprachsingen* is actually better known. In the *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (*Essay on the Origin of Languages*), which was published in 1781 but probably written in the late 1750s, Rousseau tells what amounts to the purest version of the singing → speaking → writing story. At its origin, language is song. In the beginning, there are only pure, vocalic tones without noise. Later, vocalic song becomes articulate by the insertion of consonants (which, from a physical standpoint, are indeed noise and not music). Finally, articulate language becomes silent in the form of writing. Love and pity—"moral needs [*besoins moraux*]"—are the motivations for the pure originary singing characteristic of the amorous languages of the South. The first words are "love me [*aimez-moi*]" (R/H: 47). The languages of the North are consonantal languages which have already lost the musical purity of the origin. They are languages of pity and mutual assistance, whose first words are "help me [*aidez-moi*]" (R/H: 47). With the advent of writing, singing (and with it, love and pity) is completely banished from human language, which ultimately, in the literate culture of modern civilization, descends again into mute barbarism. As everyone knows, Rousseau laments humanity's fall from the purity of the origin to the decadence of civilization.

Rousseau's model is actually a bit more complicated than my précis suggests and does display some similarities with Vico's sematogenetic story. Rousseau also has a place in his theory for a visual semiosis of gestures and objects that precedes the development of phonetic language as such. As with Condillac's language of action, the motivation for Rousseau's "language of gesture" is physical need (R/H: 6). Its main role, however, is to represent objects and not to express subjective feelings, so it is more semantic than pragmatic. It is a language that consists of "signs," by which Rousseau means visual signs. Rousseau, then, also conceives of something similar to the Vichian *sēmata* that precede phonetic language. He even trots out the same examples as Vico: the message sent to Darius by the Scythian King Idanthyrsus (R/H: 7) and, though in another context, the *sēmata*, the murderous signs Bellerophon receives in a folded tablet (R/H: 23).

A closer look, though, reveals that there are also profound differences. Rousseau's position, for example, is more radical than Vico's postulate that "all nations began to speak by writing" (§429). For Rousseau, visual signs clearly precede amorous and piteous singing, which only begins in the second stage of human development. Rousseauian primeval song is therefore not the sibling and certainly not the twin of gestural language. Visual signs are neither the mother nor the father of speech. There is in fact no direct filial relationship, whether fraternal or paternal. Visual signs constitute a type of savage semiosis that results from a bestial desire for an object, a semiosis that Rousseau resolutely differentiates from language. In this regard, Rousseau markedly distances himself from Condillac. The visual language of gestures based on physical needs predates speech and is thus not a language in the true sense.

Genuine human language never would have emerged from gestural language if a qualitative breakthrough had not taken place and if a completely new factor—love—had not appeared on the scene. For there to be language, one human has to want to express love for another human. According to Rousseau, this is only possible in the medium of sound. The shift from a visual to an auditory medium is thus not merely a transition, but a revolutionary leap. The decisive qualitative jump from physical needs to passion requires the medium of sound. There is no bridge that leads from gestures and visual signs to singing and speaking. This is why the subsequent development of writing—the visualization of language—destroys language. With the advent of writing, amorous, communicative, interpersonal, and pragmatic speech returns to the realm of objectivity, utility, and semantics. Writing destroys the passionate essence of language, which can only manifest itself in sound.

Despite its parallels with Vico's theory, Rousseau's sematogenetic story has a completely different thrust. Sung language is at the very heart of his tale of the origin of language. Rousseau's story is essentially a jeremiad on the loss of the amorous singing of the origin. Vico, by contrast, assigns *canto* an important but hardly central role and narrates the development of language as a process of overcoming and taming wild, archaic song.

1767: Herder

As told in the first edition of his *Fragmente* (*Fragments*), Herder's version of the sematogenetic story closely resembles Condillac's. Language in its childhood is a language of passions (fear, terror, and delight), a language that consists of tones (*Töne*) and gestures (*Geberde*) (Herder 1877–1913, vol. 1: 152). At this stage of human development, men emit tones, feel much, think little, and do not write at all (Herder 1877–1913, vol. 1: 153). The duo of gestures and tones very much resembles Condillac's duo of the language of action and cries of passion (which, however, Condillac

does not equate with singing). Indeed, it looks very much like Vico's acts and objects and speaking by singing. In contrast to the Vichian wild song of language's youth, for Herder language does not trip sweetly off the tongue as song until its adolescence (Herder 1877–1913, vol. 1: 153). *Sprachsingen*, language's second, poetic stage, is very similar to Rousseau's language of love. Finally, the third age of language, its age of maturity, is the age of prose and hence of writing.

1772: Herder

But the Herder of the *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (*Essay on the Origin of Language*), published in 1772, differs from the Herder of the *Fragments*. In the *Essay*, Herder criticizes not only Condillac and Rousseau's second *Discourse* (Rousseau's *Essay* had not been published yet) but also himself. In the *Fragments*, he had written that tones and gestures are signs of passions (*Leidenschaften*) and emotions (*Empfindungen*) (Herder 1877–1913, 1: 152). In the *Essay*, he discounts the notion that language could emerge from this mixture of tones and gestures, this Condillacian language of action. One of the *Essay*'s principal theoretical innovations is that in it Herder rejects passionate interjections as the source of language. The reason for the change is likely that Herder recognizes that locating the origin of language in ebullient outcries implies a transition from the pragmatic dimension to the semantic dimension, a leap from communication to cognition that neither Condillac, Rousseau, nor his own earlier text can account for. This is why Herder now locates the origin of language in the semantic dimension. He leaves behind Condillac's physical needs, Rousseau's moral needs, and his own theory of passions and emotions. He postulates that the "need to come to know [*Bedürfnis kennenzulernen*]" is the first motivation for language (R/H: 116).

The need to come to know is an acroamatic, auditory version of St. Augustine's visually oriented *appetitus noscendi*, which is situated between the alimentary and sexual appetites. It is an objective and not an intersubjective appetite. It does not consume or incorporate objects, but keeps them at a distance.³ The cognitive orientation toward the world postulated in the *Essay* is the reason why Herder adopts only one motive from the *Fragments*, that of humans imitating the sounds of nature (Herder 1877–1913, vol. 1: 153). The human being hears the lamb, whose sounds serve as a distinguishing mark. The distinguishing mark that is heard and recognized is thus already language. The replication of the sounds of nature is in fact the second stage of language genesis. According to Herder's model, the ear is the organ of language, not the mouth. Herder's theory is otocentric, not phonocentric like Rousseau's. Nevertheless, language first emerges as an imitation of the sounds of nature. For the Herder of the *Essay*, the first and only song is not a song of the

passions (whether physical or moral), but onomatopoeic sound production. It is a semantic production of sung words that in the *Fragments* represented the second stage of language's childhood.

With his concept of primordial semantic singing, Herder finds himself in agreement with Vico and in opposition to Rousseau and Condillac. Vico, too, conceives of the first word as an onomatopoeic word, a phonetic imitation of the world. But for Vico, it is not only an imitation of the lamb's bleating, but represents the creation of a vocal imaginative universal: a sound image of god (in Vico's sematogenetic model, humans do not express subjective mental states—the Condillacian motif—until the second stage of language development and do not use spoken words to communicate until the third). My serial overview of the eighteenth-century discussion of primordial sung language has now arrived at a comparison of Herder and Vico. The comparison reveals the fundamental importance of onomatopoeic and mimetic primeval singing in both authors' theories. Before I examine in detail the differences between their theoretical models, it is worth pointing out that sung language remains an important theme in the nineteenth century. For Humboldt, *Sprachsingen*—free, aimless, poetic pleasure in producing sounds—is at the heart of language creation (H, vol. 6: 156). Without it there would be no language. The speaking human being is thus essentially a “singing creature [*singendes Geschöpf*]” that combines ideas and tones (H, vol. 6: 157).

Sprachsingen versus parlare cantando

According to Karl-Otto Apel, Vico conceives of sung language as an archaic, ritualistic, rhythmic singing characteristic of ancient cultures, whereas Herder envisions it as a pastoral, idyllic, and almost literary form of song (Apel 1980: 364). Yet Vico never states that primitive *canto* is rhythmic sung language, and it would be inaccurate to describe Herder's origin scene as a romantic, lyrical, folkloristic idyll (Apel 1980: 364). It is only in the 1767 edition of Herder's *Fragments* that the second age of language is described as beautiful and idyllic singing, whereas language's first age is characterized by a type of sound production that resembles outcries and that corresponds fairly closely to Vico's notion of primitive *canto*. We shall, it seems, have to look elsewhere for the differences between Herder and Vico.

The first difference concerns the way in which the respective texts present the subject of sung language and thus the importance they assign to it. Herder speaks about *Sprachsingen* in the third section of part one of the *Essay*, which begins: “The focal point has been found where Prometheus's divine spark ignites in the human soul—with the first characteristic mark there was language” (R/H: 128). Just prior to this, Herder introduces Prometheus's divine spark—the qualitative leap that makes

humans human—in his description of the encounter between the human and the lamb. Of all the possible properties of the lamb, it is the one perceived by the ear that stands out as the decisive distinguishing mark. Hence, sounds are the first distinguishing marks to serve as elements of language. In the first subsection of section three, Herder outlines some characteristics of sound and explains how it is particularly suited to language (the second subsection celebrates hearing as the sense proper to language). It is here that Herder introduces the theme of *Sprachsingen* in an aside before he returns to the chapter's main subject. The paragraphs in question start with "And then:" (R/H: 136) and end with a sentence that clearly marks them as a digression: "But I might go endlessly afield . . . So back to the high road of the invention of language!" (R/H: 138).

There is perfunctory air about Herder's two-page excursus on *Sprachsingen*, as if it were an aspect of a theoretical problem that has to be dealt with, since so many other thinkers have written about it. This is what I meant when I said at the beginning of this chapter that Herder is aware of the seriality—or intertextuality—of the topic of sung language. Herder begins his excursus with the ancients and goes on to mention four modern authors who have addressed the problem: Leibniz, Condillac, Rousseau, and John Brown: "And then: The tradition of Antiquity says that the first language of the human race was song, and many good musical people have hence imagined that man may well have learned song from the birds" (R/H: 136). Herder is poking fun at the good musical people. Human language is not an imitation of birdsong, but is a specifically human type of singing:

As little, then, as the nightingale sings—as some imagine—to entertain man, so little can man ever be minded to invent for himself a language by trilling the trills of the nightingale. And what a monstrosity: A human nightingale in a cave or out in the forest with the hunt.

(R/H: 136)

Next, Herder rejects Leibniz's notion of a sign system consisting of musical tones. Such a system, though certainly possible from a semiotic standpoint, is too refined to have been the first language, Herder contends. He then mentions Condillac and Rousseau, who, he concedes, "did halfway find the road in that they derived the prosody and the song of the oldest languages from the cries of passion" (R/H: 137). They are half on track because they refute the theory that human song has avian origins and recognize that such tones constitute something uniquely human. But they are still only half right. The two *philosophes* are half wrong because they believe that language has its origin in passionate outcries, which is why at this point Herder repeats his critique of Condillac and Rousseau from section one of the *Essay*:

But as mere tones of emotion could never be the origin of human language (which after all was what this song was), something is still wanting to produce it, and that, once again, was the naming of every creature after its own language.

(R/H: 137)

The remark about naming creatures according to their own languages is a restatement of the central tenet of Herder's theory of language origin: the first sounds produced by humans that have the status of language are onomatopoeic (mimetic), semantic, and cognitive in nature. Humans do not imitate just birds, but all animals (and not only sheep, as one might be inclined to think after reading the first section of the *Essay*). Language is imitation, a mimetic concert of all the sounds of nature:

There then all of nature sang and sounded its recital, and the song of man was a concert of all those voices as far as his reason had use for them, as far as his emotions grasped them, as far as his organs could express them . . . [The song of man] was an expression of the language of all creatures within the natural scale of the human voice.

(R/H: 137)

Yet after rehearsing the main idea of the ovine encounter, Herder again divagates. He remarks that language will always remain a kind of song; he mentions that Brown derives poetry and music from primordial, wild song; he expresses his regret that Brown excludes language from his investigations. Finally, Herder observes that the "best samples of the poetry of the Ancients [are] remnants from the times of sung language" (R/H: 138). But he then breaks off the theoretical meandering that threatens to take him too far afield, admonishing himself to return to the subject at hand: "So back to the high road of the invention of language!" (R/H: 138). Herder's digression on *Sprachsingen* is, it would seem, motivated by the prominence of this discursive element in the eighteenth-century debate on language origin. The digression does not add anything new to his theory and appears mainly to be an opportunity to rehearse some key points of the *Essay*.

Not so in Vico's *New Science*. True, Vico does not give the subject of sung language the prominence Rousseau does, but neither is it dealt with in passing like in Herder's *Essay*. It is introduced in two important passages of the *New Science*. Though not part of the explanation of the frontispiece, which functions as a sort of executive summary of the most important concepts of Vico's new science, it is included in the second section of Book I, entitled "Elements," in which Vico sets forth the axioms of his new science. Axioms LVIII and LIX (§§228–30), two of the four

axioms on language, address sung language. The topic is also taken up in Chapter V of the Poetic Logic (§§461–2). The elements, the axioms contained in section two of Book I, articulate the *New Science's* most important systematic—as opposed to diachronic—principles. The axioms are the book's lifeblood: “just as the blood does in animate bodies, so will these elements course through our Science and animate it in all its reasoning about the common nature” (§119). In view of Vico's hemic metaphor, we can hardly overestimate the importance of the axioms, including the two axioms on sung language. In axiom LVII, we find the statement about the language of mutes that we know from Vico's description of the origin of language: “Mutes make themselves understood by gestures or objects that have natural relations with the ideas they wish to signify” (§225). Axiom LVIII then addresses the sounds produced by mutes: “Mutes utter formless sounds by singing, and stammerers by singing teach their tongues to pronounce” (§228). Axiom LIX shifts the focus from mutes and stutters to humans in general: “Men vent great passions by breaking into song, as we observe in the most grief-stricken and the most joyful” (§229). Vico explains the consequences of these two axioms in the next paragraph: “From axioms LVIII–LIX it follows that the founders of the gentile nations . . . were inexpressive save under the impulse of violent passions, and formed their first languages by singing” (§230).

Admittedly, this sounds simplistic and even naive. Yet these two axioms explain the systemic reasons for why it is probable that in primitive times wild humans' first vocal language consisted of singing. The axioms discuss both a physical and a psychological aspect of wildness, both of which are obstacles to language production. First, Vico proposes that early humans were physically challenged when it came to articulation: “in these men the fibers of the organ for articulating sounds were quite hard” (§462). Second, primitive man was psychologically hindered by the wild passions that overwhelmed him. Whether the tongue was inflexible or so paralyzed by passions that it was unable to perform voluntary movements, singing enabled primitive humans to overcome the labial impediments to sound production.

The two labial impediments are taken up again in the sections of the Poetic Logic (§§461–2) that deal with sematogenetic diachrony. Here, Vico uses the distinction between mutes and stutters to establish a gradation within the sung language of the mute wild peoples. His remarks serve as a good example of how in the eighteenth century synchronic knowledge is used to generate speculative diachronies: “since men are shown to have been originally mute, they must have uttered vowel sounds by singing as mutes do; and later, like stammerers, they must have uttered articulate consonantal sounds, still by singing” (§461). Because Vico deals with primitive *parlare cantando* in the axioms—the *New Science's* lifeblood—its significance within his theory is apparent. Unlike Herder's treatment of

Sprachsingen in an excursus, the prominence Vico gives speaking-by-singing seems to indicate that he attaches greater importance to it. Yet this impression is contradicted by the different load the subject must bear in the two authors' respective theoretical architectures.

We must resist the temptation to assume that Vico's speaking-by-singing is closer to the *philosophes'* passionate cries than to Herder's imitative concert of the voices of nature. True, Vico's phrase "venting great passions by breaking into song" from axiom LIX seems to correspond to Condillac's cries of passion and even to Rousseau's vocalic-pragmatic primitive singing. This impression is understandable for two reasons. First, because Vico often deals with the first (divine) and second (heroic) ages of language together. Second, because in the axioms Vico discusses the physical and psychological prerequisites of the speaking subject and thus emphasizes the subjective-pragmatic component of sematogenesis. The passage on the development of phonetic language (§447) clearly leads one to the conclusion that the first word is onomatopoetic (and consequently mimetic and semantic) and that the venting of passions comes after this first stage.⁴ It becomes evident in Vico's chronological account of language formation that for him language's first function is representational. Language is a semantic and objective taking possession of the world, the attempt to grasp (*concipere*) nature. Not until the second and third stages does language begin to serve the purpose of self-expression and intersubjective communication, the fundamental motives of Condillac and Rousseau's sematogenetic models.

The impression that sung language is more important for Vico's theory than it is for Herder's is contradicted by the place it occupies in the two authors' sematogenetic paradigms. For the two axioms on sung language, axioms LVIII and LIX, must be understood in the context of axiom LVII: "mutes make themselves understood by gestures or objects that have natural relations with the ideas they wish to signify. This axiom is the principle of the hieroglyphs by which all nations spoke in the time of their first barbarism" (§§225–6). We are familiar with this as the principle of mankind's first, divine language. This language consists primarily of writing (in the Vichian sense), which in the course of human history yields to the voice but which continues to exist as an autonomous semiotic system. The mutes' speaking-by-singing is born simultaneously with speaking-by-writing. Singing is writing's auditory and articulate counterpart. That all nations began to speak by writing represents one part of the theory. Its other part is that "the founders of the gentile nations ... formed their first languages by singing" (§230).

Since singing and writing are sematogenetic twins, they also have the same function. They are imitations of the enormous and overwhelming objects they represent. The natural relations that Vico says these signs have with the ideas they represent are iconic relations, which the *Newo*

Science typically describes with reference to visual signs, such as the “real words” of Idanthysus’ message or the swinging motion of the scythe. Singing, writing’s musical twin, also operates mimetically. This is evidenced by the first human utterance, which is both mankind’s first thought and an onomatopoeic word. Man’s first onomatopoeic sound image imitates thunder (not bleating sheep), a poetic process that simultaneously creates the first god: Ious.

But the fact that singing and writing are sematogenetic twins does not mean that they are equally important. At §446, which I have referred to several times, Vico makes it abundantly clear that in the beginning speaking-by-writing is the predominant mode of semiosis. This is because the first, divine language “was almost entirely mute, only very slightly articulate” (§446). In the second stage there is a balance between visual and auditory semiosis, “an equal mixture of articulate and mute,” as Vico puts it (§446). It is not until the third stage, when *canto* has already transmogrified into articulate language, that phonetic language has precedence: the third language is “almost entirely articulate and only very slightly mute” (§446). The development of human language thus proceeds from a predominance of visual expression to a predominance of acoustic expression. Vico’s developmental model, which posits the overwhelming prevalence of visual language at the beginning of the sematogenetic process, differs fundamentally from Herder’s. It may be true that, in contrast to Rousseau’s pragmatic and communicative theory of language origin, the theories of both Vico and Herder have a semantic, objective, and mimetic orientation. And both of the latter imagine that the first semiotic sound produced by mankind was an onomatopoeic, sung word. Nevertheless, Vico and Herder offer completely different evaluations of the role the senses play in language formation. For Herder, visual semiosis does not predominate at the origin; the eye and the ear are not equally suited to language. Instead, hearing is the prepotent sematogenetic sense. Situated between sight and touch, hearing has a position within the human sensory system that makes it the linguistic sense par excellence. Herder calls it “the sense for language [*der Sinn der Sprache*]” (R/H: 143). Truly human sematogenesis therefore takes place in the medium of sound. For Herder, originary *Sprachsingen* is not the weaker, second-born twin of a stronger, first-born visual language. Song is the only path to human language.

That said, an accurate assessment of Herderian *Sprachsingen* (particularly when it is compared with Rousseau’s paradigm) must emphasize that hearing plays such a central role in Herder’s story of language genesis that it ultimately weakens the position of *Sprachsingen*. For language genesis can actually take place without the human voice. Language is formed via the recognition of acoustic impressions. In other words, the mere auditory identification of a distinguishing mark already constitutes language. Herder states categorically that language would have been formed even if

the human voice had never replicated the distinguishing marks. In the end, of course, the human voice does sing and speak. But Herder's otocentrism substantially diminishes the primacy—if not the exclusivity—of *Sprachsingen*.⁵

It now becomes obvious that there is also a systematic reason for Herder's cursory treatment of *Sprachsingen*. He addresses the traditional subject of sung language in an excursus, not because it is unimportant but because it is a central thread of his sematogenetic story and one he has already dealt with implicitly; and also because the human voice—and thus *Sprachsingen*—is subordinate to hearing, the subject of the chapter that succeeds his digression.

Prometheus versus Hercules–Orpheus

Herder and Vico tell broadly similar tales of the origin of language. An appreciation of the significant dissimilarities between these two stories sheds light on how fundamentally different the two authors' *historical* models are. Herder's champion is Prometheus, the revolutionary hero who does battle with the gods and steals their fire, an act that represents the foundation of humanity. Herder's paradigm of humanization takes a defiant stance against theology, or at least against a theological approach to history. By contrast, Vico's heroes are Hercules and Orpheus. They do not fight against the gods but against humans' animality on the gods' behalf. Hercules kills the lion and fells the forest. The lyre of Orpheus subdues the animals and is, as Vico puts it, the law. Orpheus, the lord of the animals, is the founder of Greece. Vico's story is about emancipation not from the gods' tutelage but from humans' own animality. Vico does not defy theology; his story is in accord with divine providence. Biblical history remains uncontested in—and is in fact excluded from—the *New Science*. Vico only examines the history of the gentile peoples, not the history of the Jews and Christians. The exclusion of biblical theology makes it possible for the *New Science* to be a sort of alternative theology. Herder and Vico's theories of language invention are equally characterized by Promethean protest on the one hand and Herculean–Orphic domination of nature on the other. For both, humanity invents itself by inventing language. Herder's *Sprachsingen* primarily praises mankind whose first word recreates nature. By contrast, Vico's *parlare cantando* (just like his *parlare scrivendo*) praises God, whose pagan counterpart *Ious* was created by mankind's first word.

MEMORIA–FANTASIA–INGEGNO

Thus it is clearly manifest that history, poetry, and philosophy flow from the three distinct fountains of the mind, viz., the memory, the imagination, and the reason.

(Bacon 1853: 78)

European epistemology has traditionally assigned poetry to the faculty of imagination. And as nearly every book or essay about Vico will tell you, Vico views imagination as the fundamental human mental faculty and, in contradistinction to the rationalistic philosophy of his era, as the primeval ground of philosophy, science, and reason itself. He traces *logos* back to *mythos*: to poetic characters and imaginative universals which are products of the imagination. Though Vico's concept of imagination is quite conventional, imagination occupies a decidedly more prominent place within his system of the mental faculties. He equates it with memory or, more precisely, embeds it in the faculty of memory, which according to Bacon is responsible for history. For Vico, imagination is a form of memory, to which he also adds invention (*ingegno* in Italian, *ingenium* in Latin). So imagination belongs to a tripartite faculty—*memoria–fantasia–ingegno*—that I shall abbreviate as MFI. This chapter is devoted to investigating Vico's conception of memory as the foundation of human mental powers.

Like the previous two chapters on the material guises of semiosis, this chapter intervenes in an interdisciplinary discussion that includes many of the social and cultural sciences, particularly literary criticism and psychology. And as with discussions regarding the materiality of semiosis, the debate on memory is largely a response to the current media revolution. Theorists have asked whether and how the pullulation of images in our society, the omnipresence of music, and the transfer of our mnemonic storage capacity to hard drives have potentially altered humans' mental structure. This has led to inquiries about culture as the site of human memory and about the political consequences of the impending loss of social memory.¹

Memory

When I set out to write about Vico and *memoria* I was plagued by the guilty conscience of the musty antiquarian who has devoted his professional life to something that perhaps belongs in the oblivion of what Nietzsche called “critical” historiography.² After all, modern life and a hundred or so years of impressive experimental psychological research have long since transformed European *memoria* (and German *Gedächtnis*) into American memory.³ Yet there I was wanting to inquire into what a seldom-read Italian philosopher said about *memoria* over 250 years ago. I consequently felt compelled to delve into the recent literature on memory.⁴ My admittedly superficial impression after this interdisciplinary excursus is that you could do worse than to consult Vico.

There is no doubt that fascinating and revelatory empirical experiments have been carried out on retention, on long-term and short-term memory, on the forms of memory, and so forth. These experiments have been distilled into helpful models and diagrams. We now know much more about the psychological processes involved in memory. In books such as Marvin Minsky’s *The Society of Mind*, written for a general audience, one can learn about the state of the art in cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence research. The following is Minsky’s useful summary of his remarks on memory:

Memory: An omnibus term for a great many structures and processes that have ill-defined boundaries in both everyday and technical psychology; these include what we call “re-remembering,” “re-collecting,” “re-minding,” and “re-cognizing.” This book suggests that what these share in common is their involvement with how we reproduce our former *partial mental states*.

(Minsky 1986: 329)

Minsky defines partial mental states as “[a] description of the state of activity of some particular group of mental agents. This technical but simple idea makes it easy to understand how one can entertain and combine several ideas at the same time” (Minsky 1986: 329).

Despite the clarity of these passages I cannot help feeling a certain despair. For the efficient reproduction of earlier partial mental states in the modern individual memory machine seems hopelessly distant from the faculty formerly known as *memoria*. The memory function seems totally indifferent to the duties incumbent on *memoria* as conceived by the European philosophical tradition. I began to suspect that what is lost in contemporary memory research might be greater than what is gained. In a similar way, the transition from *philosophia* to philosophy has been accompanied by an enormous increase in logical sophistication. Yet the

important philosophical questions—the ones that supposedly defy solution—have been largely forgotten. The move from *memoria* to memory has apparently led to the disappearance of what the European philosophical discourse on this subject was all about. As nostalgic and naive as it might appear through the lens of current memory research, what has been lost is precisely what was at stake in the old European *memoria* debate: history, language, and culture. The effort to remember European *memoria* and to trace the roots of memory prior to its experimental and psychological modernization might not, then, turn out to be entirely fruitless.

A glance at French social psychology indicates why this endeavor could be relevant to psychological research. Studying French theories of *mémoire* makes it clear that the Americanization of memory research has withdrawn memory completely within the individual and has ignored its social aspects. In other words, American research does not address the function memory has for society (the grounding of society through mnemonic activity) or whether the individual's memory ought not to be understood in the light of social memory. Even from a psychological point of view (and not merely from that of a hopelessly unreconstructed philologist) the question needs to be asked whether the concept of individual memory ought to be examined critically using a socially grounded concept of memory. Such a critique would not reduce memory to the reactivation of partial mental states like Minsky's little white balls, toy dragons, and porcelain ducks, but would include questions about, for example, the function of memory in the wake of the Holocaust.⁵

My foray into modern psychological research did not, in the end, discourage me from further philological research into Vico's writings. In fact, it strengthened me in the opinion that reconstructing Vico's concept of *memoria* would do more than merely respond to an antiquarian and purely philological agenda. Nevertheless, I would not go as far as Donald Phillip Verene, who sees in Vico's philosophy of *memoria* an alternative to the main currents of Western philosophy; namely, philosophies of the mind and philosophies of life:

Vico's thought teaches the art of memory, the art of recovery; it recalls a capacity of the mind that has been left behind in Western philosophy. It is an art in which many of the ancients and figures of the Renaissance excelled. Philosophies of memory have no solid place in histories of philosophy. They are always seen as literary and rhetorical in nature. Because they are not conceptual, they are regarded as not philosophical.

(Verene 1981: 33)

One sign that Verene is on to something is that Vico is not mentioned in the article on memory (*Erinnerung*) in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der*

Philosophie, the standard German reference work of philosophical terms (Ritter and Gründer 1971–ongoing). Yet Verene’s locution “the art of memory” is somewhat infelicitous, since Vico gainsays, as I shall show below, the possibility of such an art. Nevertheless, considering that today rationality and fantasy seem to be drifting further and further apart, Verene’s proposal to take Vico’s philosophy of memory seriously as an alternative path serves to remind us of the linguistic (or more appropriately, sematological) turn that Vico inaugurates in European philosophy and of the linguistically constituted nature of the mind and of life.

MFI

When Vico writes about memory in the *New Science* he is taking up a conceptual thread that runs consistently through his works, starting with *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*. This is why he keeps his remarks in the *New Science* comparatively brief: he assumes his readers are familiar with the concept. The result is that he ends up explaining it in out-of-the-way corners of the work that are not among the passages usually quoted by Vico exegetes. Nevertheless, the concept of *memoria* is central to Vico’s thought. For it comprises the mental faculties that are responsible for the creation of human culture in its wild beginnings. *Memoria*, then, is responsible for the origin of the civil world.

The first passage in the *Third New Science* in which Vico mentions *memoria* is in the section of Book II (“Poetic Wisdom”) on poetic physics (§§687–709). The second is in Book III (“Discovery of the True Homer”) and discusses, in modern terms, the role of memory in an oral culture. We might have expected to find the subject among the axioms in Book I, which contain many of Vico’s synchronic-functional principles (in contrast to the diachronic approach that dominates the *New Science*). Yet here we only find the remark that children have vigorous memories (§211), an assertion that, like the axioms on *canto* discussed in the previous chapter, is worked out phylogenetically in the other passages.

Within Vico’s system, the Poetic Physics, the section containing the first reference to *memoria*, belongs to the second branch of the great tree of Poetic Wisdom. It is the branch from which grow physics, cosmography, astronomy, chronology, and geography, whereas human institutions (language, ethics, economics, and the state) grow from the first branch of the tree. The second branch of Poetic Wisdom is significant, since Vico not only emphasizes that civil institutions have a poetic origin, but also that humans’ knowledge of nature—and thus their cognition in general—has its origins in a poetic approach to the world.⁶ The Poetic Physics first deals with the elements. But its most important section contains observations on human nature that constitute a sort of poetic anthropology. It presents primitive man’s poetic ideas about the body and its workings as well as his

ideas about mental functions, which the poets of the origin localized in the body. Cognitive functions were assigned to the head, the passions to the breast, and counsel to the heart (§699).

The first mental function assigned to the head is *memoria*, which Vico declares to be the same as imagination, “*memoria* being the Latin term for *phantasia*” (§699). He adds that the barbarians of the Middle Ages equated imagination and invention (*ingegno*).⁷ According to Vico, this is exemplified by a passage in the biography of Cola di Rienzo, which describes him as a “fantastic” man, by which is actually meant that he was an “ingenious or inventive” man (§699).

Vico’s equation of memory and imagination parallels the European tradition. Aristotle allocates *mnēme* and *phantasia* to the same mental faculty, and Hobbes combines memory and imagination into a single category, though in contrast to Vico he takes a rather negative view of them: “So that *Imagination* and *Memory* are but one thing, which for divers considerations hath divers names” (Hobbes 1981: 89). What is new about the *New Science*—in terms of both Vico’s own philosophy and European philosophy generally—is that it equates *memoria–fantasia* and *ingegno*.⁸ By doing so, Vico, himself a professor of oratory, alters the traditional system of rhetoric. For by including *ingenium* within *memoria*, Vico shifts *memoria* in the direction of *inventio*. He says explicitly that memory, imagination, and invention are among mankind’s first mental operations and that all three are subject to the art of inventing (*ars inveniendi*). One has to invent something, Vico says, before it can be subjected to the art of judging.

By bringing *memoria* closer to *inventio*, Vico sanctions a critique of the rhetorical conception of memory, a critique already adumbrated in his textbook on oratory. For according to Vico’s *Art of Rhetoric*, the memory is an innate virtue. It can, like all innate abilities, be trained. But it cannot be learned. It is not, in other words, an art. This means that it cannot be taught by an art of rhetoric. In fact, Vico radicalizes Quintilian’s critique and rejects all types of mnemonics as futile:

There is nothing we can say here on memory. It is indeed an innate virtue which is maintained and kept by usage, and if there is an art to this, which I do not think there is, the proper one is that which is called mnemonics.

(Vico 1996: 207)

By equating *memoria–fantasia* and *ingenium* (*inventio*) Vico gives a surprising twist to his critique, transforming the art of memory into an art of invention.

I would now like to rehearse the three stages of Vico’s memory theory on the basis of quotations from §699 of the *Third New Science*:

- 1 “To the head they [the first humans] assigned all cognitive functions, and as these all involved imagination, they located memory . . . in the head.”
- 2 “[M]emoria [is] the Latin term for *phantasia*, or imagination” and: “in the returned barbarian times [the Middle Ages] *fantasia* was used for *ingegno*.”⁹ Vico adopts this purportedly ancient Latin and medieval usage when he concludes that: “Imagination, however, is nothing but the springing up again of reminiscences, and ingenuity or invention [*ingegno*] is nothing but the working over of what is remembered.” In the primitive era Vico is referring to, there was no writing, no counting or reckoning, and no abstract terms. This trivium—*scrivere, conto e ragione, vocaboli astratti*—is characteristic of modernity. In the primitive era, all human mental activity consisted of MFI.
- 3 The human mind “exercised all its force in these three excellent faculties which come to it from the body. All three appertain to the primary operation of the mind, whose regulating art is topics, just as the regulating art of the second operation of the mind is criticism; and as the latter is the art of judging, so the former is the art of inventing.”¹⁰

The proposal to include memory in invention is not only noteworthy for historians of rhetoric. This passage is of considerable significance as evidence that Vico’s thought is in the process of liberating itself from traditional rhetorical principles and applying the concepts of rhetorical theory to a theory or history of the human mind. Here, invention is obviously not merely a rhetorical skill, but represents the beginning of all human thought and culture. Vico construes it as the invention of ideas by means of perception, the first mental operation:

And since naturally the discovery or invention of things comes before criticism of them, it was fitting that the infancy of the world should concern itself with the first operation of the human mind, for the world then had need of all invention for the necessities and utilities of life, all of which had been provided before the philosophers.

(§699)

Before anything else can happen, all the ideas that are useful and necessary for life have to be invented by means of MFI, the “working over of what is remembered” (§699). Only then are the philosophers free to apply the art of criticism to judge the ideas that have been invented.

According to Vico’s paradigm, invention creatively adapts experience. Since memory is neither merely retention (*mnēme*) nor merely recollection (*anamnēsis*), it is, as Vico says in agreement with the “theological

poets,” the mother of the muses (§699). The muses are the human arts that spring from the imaginative and ingenious memory (§699). Vico’s interpretation of the ingenious Mnemosyne as the mother of all human invention correlates with the Virgil epigraph at the beginning of the *First New Science*. “A Iove principium Musae” (The Muses descended from Jove) (FNS: 1). Vico takes up the same theme again when he states near the end of this edition that “All things are full of Jove [*Iovis omnia plena*]” (FNS: §475). For Jove is humanity’s first invention. Jove is the first imaginative universal and as such the first idea of mankind’s still wild thought. The invention of god by man, a bold hypothesis in an age in which repression by the Church was still very real, is the first example of the MFI process. It is the creation of a divine figure from the experience and memory of a thunderstorm by means of imaginative magnification and ingenious analogy. Jove himself is Mnemosyne’s child. As god and as man’s first thought, Jove is the father of all other thoughts. He is thus the father of the muses, including the first muse, Urania, whom he engenders with Mnemosyne.

In the final analysis, by systematically reconfiguring the mental faculties, Vico mixes up Bacon’s canonical triad of history, poetry, and philosophy (corresponding to the ascending sequence of *memoria*, *phantasia*, and *ratio*), which serves as the epigraph to this chapter. By equating memory and imagination, Vico combines history and poetry (which were reduced to their creative core by means of invention, the fundamental rhetorical faculty) to form an entity that he calls philology. But more than anything else, Vico makes it clear that philosophy is built on philology, that MFI is the primitive foundation of reason: the wild poet must first invent something by means of MFI before the philosopher can subject it to rational judgment. Of course, one of the objectives of Vico’s new system is to bridge the gap between philosophy and philology. It thus stands in radical opposition to coeval philosophical systems that, as we saw in Chapter 1, were eager to cleanse reason of all poetic and historical experience. The theme of uniting the poetic-historical with the rational-philosophical will not appear again with this level of clarity until post-Kantian philosophy.

Section 819 in the book on the True Homer is the second passage in which Vico discusses the basic mental faculties of his new science. It deals with the semiotic media of early cultures and thus with a subject that since antiquity has been closely linked to the discourse on memory. In view of the current media revolution, it is likewise a central theme of recent mnemonic efforts on behalf of memory.¹¹ Plato was right to lament the fact that writing weakens memory. And today we ask ourselves whether the flood of new media will finally bring about the universal distraction that two centuries ago Kant already viewed as an assault on memory. Does the media revolution represent a final attack that will result in complete

absent-mindedness? At stake, it seems, is whether language will survive the onslaught of images.¹²

At §819 of the *Third New Science*, Vico remarks on the vigorous memories of illiterate cultures, which he considers to be evidence for his discovery of the True Homer. The True Homer is naturally not a real person, but a poetic character by means of which the Greeks imagined themselves to be the poets of the Homeric epics. The Greek peoples themselves are the True Homer, and Homer is the image of this poetic collective. Section 819 contains one of the so-called philosophical proofs of this notion. As orally transmitted texts that originated before writing was invented, the Homeric poems were stored in memory. The art of writing is a practice that belongs, together with reckoning and abstract terms, to modern, rational culture (§699).¹³ Because the early nations desired to retain their social institutions and laws, their wonderfully powerful memories—which they have in common with children—aided them in their illiterate state:

In that human indigence, the peoples, who were almost all body and almost no reflection, must have been all vivid sensation in perceiving particulars, strong imagination in apprehending and enlarging them, sharp wit in referring them to their imaginative genera, and robust memory in retaining them.

(§819)

The above passage lists sensory perception, memory, and invention as the faculties that are necessary for inventing and retaining history in an illiterate society. It is followed by the etymological and linguistic equation of memory, imagination, and invention that we are familiar with from §699. And Cola di Rienzo is mentioned again. Section 699 implies that MFI had a certain functional diversity; §819 makes this even clearer. After the senses perceive an object, the imagination seizes its particulars and magnifies them; invention then establishes a reference to the imaginative universal to which an exemplar belongs; finally, memory retains the particulars: “Memory thus has three different aspects: memory when it remembers things, imagination when it alters or imitates them, and invention when it gives them a new turn or puts them into proper arrangement and relationship” (§819). Hence, memory is a system that undergoes internal functional differentiation. Memory comes after sensory perception and is itself still corporeal thought. As memory in the more narrow sense, its task is to retain and recollect perceived objects. It therefore combines the functions of *mnēme* and *anamnēsis*. As imagination, memory is largely reproductive; it magnifies the objects it remembers and is thus responsible for the creation of the giants. And as invention, it is the ability to discover relationships (which are best when they are “acute”) and gives corporeal thought its first ordering principle, one essentially based on analogy.¹⁴

In sum, MFI is the mental faculty of the genesis of thought and culture. As the mother of the muses and as the beginning of all arts and human skills, MFI is the art of invention, a topical ability. As the originary mental faculty, memory stands in opposition to judgment, the preeminent mental faculty of modernity. For this reason, the topics (the art of inventing) stand in opposition to criticism (the art of judging), the main art of modernity.

However, the *New Science* is not merely a more or less poetic reconstruction of a primordial era. Its reconstruction is explicitly designed to articulate a “new critical method” (A: 167), a new critical art of judgment: in short, a new philosophy. I would now like to return to the beginning of the *Third New Science* in order to clarify the function of MFI—the mental faculty of the origin and the infancy of humanity—within this new critical method.

Deconstructive *memoria*

The *Third New Science* begins without words. It begins with a picture. In the book’s first paragraph, Vico explains the two reasons for using the picture (see page 9). First, placing the picture before the text is intended “to give the reader some conception of this work before he reads it” (§1). Second, the picture is intended to help the reader, with the aid of his imagination, “to call [the idea of this work] back to mind after he has read it” (§1). The wordless beginning is thus explicitly justified in the name of imagination and memory.

It has never quite worked for me. I have read the *New Science* several times and flatter myself that I have grasped and retained the idea of the work. And though I must have seen the picture a hundred times, I simply cannot remember it very well. As I write this I am trying to recall what is in the picture without looking at it. I know that metaphysics is balancing rather nimbly on an altar. I know that a beam of divine light from a triangular eye in the sky is shining onto her heart and being reflected from it. There is a statue of Homer somewhere. There is a pile of objects in front of the altar. I recall the fasces, Mercury’s winged helmet, a tablet with letters on it, and a scale. But my memory of this visual allegory of the *New Science* appears to me to be significantly less vigorous, to use Vico’s term, than what the text has to say. Above all, the allegory confuses me more than it assists me in recalling the main idea of the *New Science*.

Of course, it doesn’t matter whether I can recall the picture, but that Vico clearly intends to say that the memory retains images particularly well and that images are helpful for memorizing the contents of entire texts. Indeed, the ancient art of mnemonics is based on this contention.¹⁵ As we have seen, Vico does not set any store by mnemonics as an aid to rhetoric. Nevertheless, he obviously adopts its main assumption that images are

easier to remember than imageless ideas (words), likely because, among other things, they activate the imagination.

Moreover, it doesn't really matter whether images can be retained better than texts. What matters most is the process by which the *New Science* presents its new critical method, a process that amounts to the reduction of conceptual thought and rational language to images. The entire *New Science* revolves around this process. Vico contemplates the foundations of our rational culture by tracing it back to the images of the origin. This deconstructive gesture is not only the object of his contemplations, but is his thought process itself.¹⁶ Again and again Vico underscores the considerable difficulty moderns have in grasping the imaginative thought of the origin. The wordless beginning of his book gives us a taste of this difficulty. From the start Vico shows us how we are supposed to imagine the wild origin: by imagining his book as an image. The fact that this method doesn't work well for me merely demonstrates that I am a typically modern human being.

The beginning of the *Third New Science* replicates the beginnings of thought as Vico understands it. In the beginning was the Image. We could add that the Image was with God and the Image was God. Or, to put it in still more Vichian terms: In the beginning was Myth (poetic characters and imaginative universals), and Myth was God: Jove. Only then does the image become a word. Only then does *mythos* become *logos*. If we want to imagine the origin, then we must trace the word back to the image and *logos* back to *mythos*. We are able to do this because the word has an image as its substrate, because the word retains the memory of myth even though this memory is often buried. The first sound image of God is preserved in the name Jove, the onomatopoetic exclamation "Ious" that imitates the crash of thunder.

The *New Science* is, then, a book of *memoria* in two senses. First, it is a book written to counter the forgetting of *memoria* and the wild, image-filled origin, a forgetfulness characteristic of the age of enlightened rationalism and the arbitrary sign. Second, it is a book that overcomes this forgetting "with such aid as *imagination* may afford" (§1; my emphasis). Beneath the apparent arbitrariness of signs, deconstructive *memoria* uncovers the creation of Mnemosyne: images, *mythos*, and imaginative universals.¹⁷

Though my memory was poor, by using my memory of the frontispiece to reduce the *New Science* to an image I didn't do such a bad job of understanding the idea of the work. For the image itself doesn't really matter. Nor does whether I can remember precisely what it depicts. What really matters is to remember the *process* of condensing the book into an allegorical image.

At §462 of the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel discusses his era's attempts "to rehabilitate the Mnemonic of the ancients" (Hegel 1998: 310).¹⁸ For him, the

translation of language-based concepts into images is a mental step backward. It is a step from memory (which he conceives as *memoria verborum*) back to imagination (*memoria rerum*). It is a step from a higher, imageless form of thought to a lower, graphic form of thought. He refers to this step backward as “torture” (Hegel 1998: 310). This is precisely the torture Vico establishes as the fundamental procedure of his new science. The foundations of society and culture—in other words, the object of the *New Science*—can only be uncovered by stepping back from the literate, rational, and bookish academies into the “great ancient forest” (§13). This can only be accomplished by subjecting oneself to a sort of mental torture. It is indeed excruciating for the modern mind to surrender its concepts and to think in poetic characters and imaginative universals. But there is no other way. Vico’s discovery, the master key to his work, cost him “persistent research” because “[w]ith our civilized natures we cannot at all imagine and can understand only by great toil the poetic nature of these first men” (§34).¹⁹

Absent-mindedness

In the first half of the eighteenth century, Vico’s philosophy of *memoria* doubtless served as a healthy corrective, reminding triumphant European rationalism of its wild and fantastic origins. It held up the image as a mirror to the concept, and it pointed to the *mythos* that underlies *logos*. This was Vico’s specific accomplishment in the history of philosophy, even if it was not noticed outside Italy. Vico combated the conceit of the scholars by reminding them of thought’s wild roots. Romanticism took a similar approach in the early nineteenth century, as did, to the point of despair, Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* in the mid-twentieth century.

Yet, in addition to the still quite virulent problems of rationality, the concept, and the arbitrary sign, contemporary culture has realized that it also has the opposite problem, the problem of its savage origins. In other words, our culture is ruled both by extreme rationality and extreme corporeality and fantasy. It is replete with what Vico calls abstract terms and reckoning, and at the same time has turned its back on concepts, the academy, and rationality. It is a culture of arbitrary signs and rational concepts and, simultaneously, a culture of fantastic visual and sonic images. In our culture, the world of images stands in direct opposition to the world of concepts, labor, and functionality. After modern human beings spend the day processing abstract signs they distract themselves in the evening with images. Modern humans are always ec-static. They are either hard at work or hard at mindless play. They are like the female novel readers Kant criticizes in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, whose reading puts them into a “fantastic frame of mind.” For Kant, this represents “one

of the deadliest attacks on the memory” and results in “habitual absent-mindedness” (Kant 1978: 77).

In Vico’s terms, our world is doubly barbarous. It is marked by what he describes as “the barbarism of reflection” as well as by the “barbarism of sense” (§1106): the barbaric world of imaginative images characteristic of mankind’s wild origins. It is the great ancient forest, but now only as a simulacrum, an artificial forest of images. The problem with the global forest of images is that, unlike the primordial forest, it is a concomitant of modernity’s memory loss. In the post-rational era, MFI’s primitive, wild power has long since been depleted. Images are now produced by a small number of image-makers: the new theological poets. The rest of us merely surrender ourselves to the imagistic frenzy.²⁰ The underlying problem of our rational and fantastic dual culture is that it no longer mediates between these two worlds. The first is the world of concepts in which language has irrevocably become a collection of arbitrary signs in the form of technical user manuals and referential descriptions. It is a world in which every reference to a mythical past would only disturb the smooth functioning of the system and invite ridicule. The second is the world of imagistic frenzy that eludes every attempt at abstraction and thus every attempt to transform it into language. The dual society of total functionality and total ecstasy—of dual absent-mindedness, in other words—results in dual speechlessness.²¹

By contemplating the imaginative primordial ground of our rationality, Vico’s *New Science* seeks to mediate between signs and images. Its method is of course more retrospective than prospective, and its torturous steps backward are ultimately more regressive than progressive. But Vico is not a propagandist of backwardness and is not nostalgic for the primal past. He is not a primitivist. Vico takes an unmistakably positive view of humanity’s mental and political progress from *mythos* to *logos* and from images to signs. He likewise welcomes the political transition from theocracy and aristocracy to monarchical states and popular commonwealths (§32). Vico greets as humanization the historical process by which the people become the “absolute lords” of semiosis and laws (§32). He only reminds modern, enlightened culture of its savage origins in order to shield it from the other barbarism, the barbarism of reflection, and to prevent it from relapsing into new savagery (from which humanity would then have to ascend laboriously in a new historical cycle). This is the objective of his critique of the conceit of the scholars and the political purpose behind his critique of logocentrism. By pointing out in hundreds of examples the transformation of early fables into language—in Italian, the movement from *favola* to *favella*—Vico describes humanity’s necessary ascent from myth to rationality.

If we take Vico seriously today, this second perspective is equally important. For though it is still necessary to make enlightened *logos* aware of its

mythic roots, it is just as necessary to demand that images be transformed into language and *mythos* into *logos*. It is crucial that both processes take place, particularly in the doubly barbarous modern era. Whether spurred on by Vico, the Romantics, or Horkheimer and Adorno, it is essential to bring concepts into contact with their mythic roots and with what they contain that is indivisibly individual. Equally essential is the Enlightenment gesture—a gesture that can also be found in both Vico and in Horkheimer and Adorno—of transforming images into language. The relevance of Vico’s philosophy of *memoria* lies in this dual orientation.²²

Language

We should not expect too much of Vico’s philosophy. Fortunately, the somewhat baroque style and obvious errors of Vico’s text make it strange enough to render impossible an uncritical allegiance or epigonic Vichianism. From a linguistic point of view, the limits of Vico’s conception of language are set by its semioticism.

This assertion may at first seem surprising, since Vico again and again criticizes the notion that words are arbitrary and that signifier and signified do not resemble one another. It is surprising, then, since Vico rejects the main premise of all semiotic conceptions of language; namely, that signs are arbitrary. Indeed, the entire *New Science* aims to ground the arbitrary signs of *logos* in the “natural” images of *mythos*. In this regard Vico is certainly anti-semiotic. And in this regard Vico is on the right track if the alleged naturalness of signification is understood structurally; that is, if by the naturalness of words one means the indivisible synthesis of signifier and signified that grows out of their isomorphism in the image. From other perspectives, however, Vico retains a semiotic conception of language, a conception that is actually reinforced by his sematology.

We have just seen how Vico, despite his criticism of the human age and particularly of modernity’s overweening rationalism, undoubtedly views the development of human civilization as progress. Or, to put it more accurately, he views it as an ascent from body to mind. As I noted in Chapter 3, from a semiotic perspective this ascent manifests itself in the increasing arbitrariness of semiosis and in the dissolution of the iconic synthesis of signifier and signified. That language becomes evermore sign-like and noniconic is for Vico one of mankind’s true achievements. For Vico, therefore, the impression that language is arbitrary is not false. He only points out that language is not as rational as his fellow moderns proudly assume, but has its roots in more primitive human abilities; namely, the image-making imagination. Word signs are the result of an ascent from “corporeal” mental faculties to reason and consequently do not have negative connotations, since for Vico, too, the mind is on a higher plane than the body.

The traditional hierarchy that places the mind above the body is the first aspect of Vico's semioticism. It correlates with the primacy of the idea over the sensually and corporeally perceived signifier.²³ In this context, I would again like to quote §401 in which language first emerges "mentally" as an idea: "For speech was born in mute times as mental [or sign] language [*nacque mentale*], which Strabo in a golden passage says existed before vocal or articulate [language]; whence *logos* means both word and idea" (§401). This is, of course, why divine providence arranged it so that religions, the primordial ground of all human culture, "attach more importance to meditation than to speech" (§401). In Chapter 3, I interpreted *nacque mentale* as evidencing not so much of the primacy of mind over body as the primacy of muteness and vision (and thus, writing) over phonetic language. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that Vico emphasizes the primacy of mental activity over corporeal signifiers and communication.

My interpretation of §401 construed "idea" etymologically as an ideal portrait (*ritratto ideale*) and thus as always already visual. This again brings us closer to the sought-after synthesis of signifier and signified, but also saddles us with the problem of visuality and consequently with a new aspect of Vico's semioticism. *Sēmata* and *signa* are originally and etymologically visual phenomena. Languages, on the other hand, are phonetic and acoustic. Even colloquially, European languages differentiate between signs and words. In everyday language, "to give someone a sign" refers to a visual process. By giving words a dense substratum of images and writing and by giving sounds (*voci*) a dense substratum of gestures and objects (*atti/ceni* and *corpi*), Vico distances himself from speech and moves toward the sign. And a little *canto* at the origin doesn't change things much.

As we have seen, the third semiotic aspect of Vico's conception of language is also connected to the reduction of words to images. The images that underlie words say something. They are predications, statements, texts, and fables. The Latin word for anger, *ira*, says the blood boils in my heart. The word *pater* predicates that the father engenders legitimate children. Vico's position is thus semiotistic, since semiotics is a theory of messages and texts of all types. Semiotic analysis takes place at the level of the message (where it can study the specific structure of language), not at the level of the word. The opposition of word to message has been played out recently in theoretical contests that pit Saussure against Peirce. According to semioticians, Peirce wins, since Peirce's genuinely semiotic perspective establishes a theory of the message, whereas Saussure, a speech theorist, focuses on the word. But words are not messages and thus even in a colloquial sense not signs. They do not state anything and do not have a predicative structure. A word does not say anything about the world; it articulates it. We have, therefore, again arrived at the specific structure of language which eludes Vico in his vacillation between sign and image.

The Aristotelian tradition conceives of the word as an arbitrary sign. Vico's philosophy of *memoria* is aimed at making sure that the image contained in the arbitrary sign is not forgotten. What his philosophy seeks but does not yet find is language (Humboldt will be the first to discover language in a philosophical sense). Vico's philosophy is not yet a philosophy of language; it remains a semiotic philosophy.²⁴ Vico's sematology is a philosophy of language in search of itself. It searches for language between the sign and the image and has thus already marked out the locus of language: the locus "midway between mind and body" (§1045). But Vico's semiotic philosophy does not yet completely understand what it finds there; namely, language in its specific structure as neither image nor sign. Language has properties that distinguish it from both of these entities. And it has structural relations between signifier and signified that are different from those that obtain in either images or signs.

Humboldt put it simply. In the case of the sign, signifier and signified have nothing to do with one another; in the case of the image, they are one and the same; and in the case of the word, they are inseparably linked (as in the image) but still distinguishable (as in the sign) (H, vol. 5: 428ff.). This specific property of language is what André Martinet has called "double articulation" (Martinet 1964: 22–4, 26–7). Words (and similar linguistic entities, such as morphemes) divide the world into indivisible entities of signified and sound. This is the first articulation. For its part, sound is articulated into constituent elements (phonemes). This is the second articulation which eliminates any and all iconic isomorphism between signifier and signified. Double articulation refers to the synthesis of signifier and signified and simultaneously to their heteromorphism. It is this insight into the structure of language that first makes it possible for the midway point between body and mind where Vico locates language to be liberated from mentalistic or ideocentric paradigms and taken seriously to a radical degree. It is not until this insight that the semiotic primacy of the idea is eliminated and *parola* and *idea*—and according to Vico at §401, *logos* means both—coincide linguistically.

The kind of philosophy of language that Vico is searching for and that I shall sketch in greater detail in the next chapter suggests with greater clarity what conclusions must be drawn from the problem of the dual barbarism of modern culture. The point is not to trace signs and technical-referential abstractions back to images or, conversely, to reduce wild images to abstract signs. Because language mediates between both extremes, the point is instead to heal the barbarism of the sign *and* the barbarism of the image. If this does not happen, technical-referential rationality and the artificial forest of images will drift further apart. Signs and images will no longer be mediated by the specific form of MFI that we call language. And, as André Leroi-Gourhan has predicted, the life form specially equipped for this mediation—*homo sapiens*—will disappear.

Perhaps that would not be so bad. But Vico's philosophy of deconstructive *memoria*, a philosophy that put Western thought on the path toward language, serves to remind us of this life form.

Recollection (*Erinnerung*)

It has been said that Hegel's concept of memory inverts the old terminological opposition between *mnēme* and *anamnēsis*. His concept is largely one of retention, the function that has traditionally been called *mnēme*. Hegel imagines memory as a deep pit (*Schacht*) in which all perception disappears. At §453 of the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel writes that memory is "intelligence as this night-like mine or pit in which is stored a world of infinitely many images and representations, yet without being in consciousness" (Hegel 1998: 298).²⁵ In Hegel's theory, imagination takes over the traditional role of *anamnēsis*: the bringing to light of what has been recollected. Imagination produces images, symbols, and, ultimately, signs, of which language is for Hegel the prototype.²⁶ The final product of imagination, the word sign, is finally recollected (*erinnert*) by memory. That is, it is brought back into the deep pit of the self. Like Condillac's concept of memory (*mémoire*), Hegel's concept of memory (*Gedächtnis*) is completely entwined with signs or with signs conceived of as words.²⁷ Memory is the depositing of words into the pit of the self. The path that a Hegelian representation (*Vorstellung*) takes from recollection (the night-like pit of intelligence), to imagination, and to memory amounts to a death march for images. It is a semiotic journey during which images are transformed into signs and ultimately into names and concepts. The course Hegelian ideas take is from *memoria rerum* (recollection), past the imagination, to *memoria verborum* (memory).

Hegel's philosophy dumps the images of perception into the night-like pit of recollection from which they finally liberate themselves—in this Journey to the Center of the Spirit—as signs in the medium of the voice. Before the self is fully in its center, the voice (*phōnē*) echoes from the pit of the self. This voice can now only produce arbitrary signs which are no longer icons of what they represent. Moreover, it is a solitary voice which does not necessarily have to be heard in order to constitute thought. This voice ultimately fades away as "a free vibration *within itself*" in the deep pit of memory where thought internalizes itself into conceptual thought (Hegel 1998: 274).

In contrast to Hegel's concept of recollection, Vico's concept of *memoria* stands less on the side of *mnēme* (retention) and more on the side of *anamnēsis* (recollection). As both *fantasia* and *ingegno*, Vico's concept largely corresponds to Hegel's notion of imagination. But in contrast to Hegelian imagination, Vichian *memoria* remains tied to images. Consequently, it precisely excludes the sign-making imagination and the

memory of the word conceived as a sign. Vico's concept of *memoria* refers to the ability to create (increasingly less iconic) images, not to the ability to create noniconic, arbitrary signs. For Vico, it is incorrect to assume that words are arbitrary. It is the assumption with which scholars "given peace to their ignorance" of the origin and that Vico's deconstruction seeks to refute (§444). As we have seen, Vico's entire project is aimed at deconstructing the (allegedly) arbitrary sign.

Vico's philosophy of *memoria* is, then, diametrically opposed to Hegel's conception of recollection, the last and greatest example of precisely the type of philosophy that Vico's project inveighs against. The philosophy of deconstructive *memoria* reminds sign-fixated, rational European philosophy of its imagistic and imaginative origins. By means of its torturous regression it seeks to deflate the conceit of the scholars. By contrast, Hegel's philosophy of recollection recounts the progress of reason and the triumph of the sign. Hegelian images are thrown into the shadowy pit and become, by means of semiotic metamorphosis, signs—until these themselves disappear into the same pit. This deconstructive cycle reveals Hegel's recollection to be itself the Orcus of forgetting from which Vico seeks to save language.

VICO AND HUMBOLDT ON IMAGINATION AND LANGUAGE

Rome and America

Rome

Wilhelm von Humboldt probably never read anything by Vico, although he had an excellent opportunity to do so. For six years, from 1802 to 1808, Humboldt was Prussia's ambassador in Rome. He was more attached to the city than to any other in Europe and spent the happiest years of his life there. Humboldt spoke Italian, read Italian books, and even viewed Italian as the prototype of the transformation process by which the Romance languages retain and renew the "form" of Latin from which they descend (Humboldt 1988: 207–13). Nevertheless, Humboldt paid little attention to the Italian intellectual scene. During his earlier stay in Paris, by contrast, he had been at the center of the scientific, philosophical, artistic, and political life of post-revolutionary France. Around 1800, Rome was not, after all, the capital of Italian letters. This is likely one of the reasons why Humboldt did not associate the city with modern Italy. In 1803, after a year in Rome, Humboldt writes to his friend Carl Gustav von Brinkmann that Rome is a desolate wilderness—the most beautiful, the noblest, and the most captivating wilderness he has ever seen. Those few who are capable of appreciating it will find the world there (Humboldt 1960–1981, vol. 5: 202).

The world Humboldt refers to is not modern Italy and therefore not the world of Vico, who by the early nineteenth century, roughly sixty years after his death in 1744, had achieved something like national fame. No, the world Humboldt means is antiquity. In a letter to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe written in 1804, Humboldt states that Rome focuses in one place all of antiquity, from poets to politics (Humboldt 1960–1981, vol. 5: 216). In these missives to Brinkmann and Goethe, Humboldt emphasizes that antiquity, as something that belongs irretrievably to the past, must be experienced as a historical period. Antiquity can only be perceived from a modern point of view or, as Humboldt explains to

Brinkmann, “romantically [*romantisch*]” (Humboldt 1960–1981, vol. 5: 203). By a romantic point of view Humboldt means through the lens of the post-Christian, occidental world. Humboldt indeed attempts to focus his view of antiquity while he is in Rome. The most significant literary and historical project of his Roman sojourn bears the programmatic title *Latium und Hellas*.

America

In the letter to Brinkmann, Humboldt also announces that he is pursuing his language studies more assiduously than ever. He is, he writes, drawn repeatedly to the mysterious and wonderful connection between all languages and particularly to the pleasure of entering, with each new language he studies, a new system of thought and feeling. Moreover, Humboldt claims to have discovered the key that simplifies access to every language and makes each one interesting in itself (Humboldt 1960–1981, vol. 5: 206–7). Humboldt tells his correspondent that many of these issues will be dealt with in his forthcoming study of Basque. The book was not to be published in its author’s lifetime. Parts of it subsequently appeared in the supplements on Basque in Johann Christoph Adelung and Johann Severin Vater’s four-volume *Mithridates*, published between 1806 and 1817, and in Humboldt’s own book on ancient Iberian place names, which was published in 1821 and which Chateaubriand would later find so amusing: *Prüfung der Untersuchungen über die Urbewohner Hispaniens vermittelt der Vaskischen Sprache (An Assessment of the Studies on Hispania’s Native Peoples Through an Examination of the Basque Language)*. Humboldt’s book on Basque, a superb historical and ethnological study based on his travels in the Pyrenees, would not be published until 1920. Humboldt’s encounter with the Basque language and Basque culture in 1800 and 1801, shortly before his posting to Rome, fueled his fascination with linguistics. Rome is consequently the place where it becomes manifest that Humboldt will devote himself to the study of language. Humboldt’s linguistic project ripens during his years in the eternal city. *Latium und Hellas*, the fragmentary essay he wrote there, contains an early sketch of Humboldt’s language theory. Rome is also the place where Humboldt enlarged his store of linguistic knowledge, where he reveled in the mysterious and wonderful connection between all languages, and above all where he encountered America. In Rome Humboldt was fortunate enough to have access to the rich material Lorenzo Hervás had gathered on the languages of America. After Humboldt’s stay in Rome, his brother, Alexander, brought back data on Native American languages from his scientific voyages, material that Wilhelm edited for Alexander’s account of his travels.

Antiquity and America

Though Humboldt likely never read any of Vico's writings, his interest in antiquity and America recalls the parallels Vico draws between Rome and Greece (Latium and Hellas) on the one hand and Native Americans on the other. The way they draw these parallels, though, already begins to point to a number of differences between the two thinkers. For Humboldt, antiquity represents the pinnacle of mankind's intellectual and cultural achievement; classical Greek, the height of linguistic perfection. This is because Greek is based on the principle of "synthesis": the conjoining or the intimate union of two entities in which each retains its individuality (the paradigm for Humboldt's notion of synthesis is, of course, love). America, in Humboldt's mind, is the opposite of ancient Greece. It exemplifies an anti-Hellenic principle—"incorporation" (*Einverleibung*)—in both a political and linguistic sense.¹ Incorporation does not bring about the synthesis of two equal entities, but the destruction of one by the other (the paradigm for incorporation is the consumption of food).² From a political point of view, Spain cruelly "incorporated" much of the New World instead of pursuing a synthesis or marriage of Christian Europe and the autochthonous cultures of South and Central America. According to Humboldt, the Aztecs themselves had pursued an equally incorporative foreign policy vis-à-vis their neighbors before the Spanish arrived on the scene. And from a linguistic standpoint, sentence construction in Native American languages such as Nahuatl is likewise based on the principle of incorporation. By this Humboldt means that in Nahuatl sentences are condensed into a single word: a sentence's component words are incorporated into a larger sentence-word, thereby losing their individuality.

The ancient past that Vico's *New Science* envisions is the wild, prehistoric past of the Greek and Latin myths in all their figural richness, not the advanced cultures of classical Greece and Rome. In Nietzsche's terms, Vico's Greece is more Dionysian than Apollonian. For Vico, then, the savage America described in the travel literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries does not represent Europe's opposite, but the counterpart to pagan Europe's brutish prehistory. Wild America provides synchronic evidence for Vico's theories about the conditions under which the gentile nations must have lived.

Near the beginning of the section of the *New Science* on poetic metaphysics is one of the many passages in which Vico draws parallels between antiquity and America. The poetic metaphysics of the gentile world was not "rational and abstract" but "felt and imagined" (§375). It involved the imaginative creation of gods. To support his assertion, Vico first invokes the ancient *gentes* by reminding the reader of a previously quoted passage from Lactantius. He then continues: "This is now confirmed by the American Indians, who call gods all the things that surpass their small

understanding" (§375). As is often the case, Vico supplements the example of the Native Americans with that of the Germanic tribes: "We may add the ancient Germans dwelling about the Arctic Ocean, of whom Tacitus tells that they spoke of hearing the sun pass at night from west to east through the sea, and affirmed that they saw the gods" (§375). Finally, Vico underscores the importance of this evidence for his argument: "These very rude and simple nations help us to a much better understanding of the founders of the gentile world with whom we are now concerned" (§375).

Vico and Humboldt

The purpose of my prefatory remarks in this chapter has been to suggest that, the similarities identified by the secondary literature notwithstanding, there are a number of important differences between Vico and Humboldt. The similarities between their philosophies of language have been remarked at least since Benedetto Croce's Vico book, first published in Italy in 1911:

Romanticism too, especially in Germany but also more or less in other countries, was Vichian, emphasizing as it did the original function of the imagination. His doctrines of language recurred when Herder and Humboldt treated it not intellectuallistically as an artificial system of symbols, but as a free and poetic creation of the mind.

(Croce 1964: 238–9)

More recently, Karl-Otto Apel has assigned Vico an even greater role as a forerunner to Humboldt. In a book that describes the "humanistic" path that leads from Dante's logomysticism to Vico's nominalism, Apel discusses the similarities between Vico, Herder, Hamann, and Humboldt. For Apel, Vico is a precursor of Humboldt and of German historical thought in general (Apel 1980: 374). He notes two main parallels. The first is a similarity in the semiotic grounding of their theories of language. Vico's conception of language is based on a *physei* theory according to which words are simultaneously what Humboldt would call "images" and "signs" (Apel 1980: 374). The second is Vico's project of a common mental dictionary, which collects, again in Humboldtian terms, the "world-views" (*Weltansichten*) that are contained in the words of different languages. For Apel, the common mental dictionary foreshadows Humboldt's notion of the comparative study of language (Apel 1980: 376). Like Vico, according to Apel, Humboldt also views language diversity in the context of a common human language.

Moreover, Günter Wohlfahrt, who correctly points out that nothing can

be gained from an “eclectic” compilation of similar-sounding Vico and Humboldt passages, has set out to compare their “fundamental ideas [*Grundansichten*]” about language (Wohlfahrt 1984: 63). He takes up Croce’s reference to the imagination, as well as the poetic process of language, and invokes Humboldt’s theory of imagination to support his claim that Vico and Humboldt indeed share a number of fundamental ideas about language.

These references and comparisons are doubtless correct. They identify a number of notions that the two thinkers undeniably share and reconstruct a continuity in European thought and a common European tradition that I have no desire to refute. Nevertheless, the problem with claims of continuity is that they usually adopt one of two schemas: master-epigone or forerunner-pinnacle. Their primary drawback is that they tend to obscure differences. Kurt Müller-Vollmer has done much to liberate Vico from being typecast—particularly in Germany—as a precursor of German Romanticism’s conceptions of language and history as well as of Dilthey’s concept of *Geisteswissenschaft* (Müller-Vollmer 1988).³ In this spirit, by comparing Vico and Humboldt’s notions of imagination and their critique of the Aristotelian concept of language as a system of arbitrary signs, the rest of this chapter is devoted to teasing out the differences that underlie what often turn out to be superficial similarities between the two thinkers’ conceptions of language.

Fantasia

The text Wohlfahrt quotes to support his argument is from Humboldt’s early work, *Über Göthes Herrmann und Dorothea* (*Aesthetic Essays on Goethe’s Hermann and Dorothea*) published in 1799. It constitutes a summary of Humboldt’s theory of poetic imagination:

[The poet and with him every artist] playfully, as it were, transforms the actual object into an object of the fantasy. He begins and ends . . . by intimately conjoining himself and the world around him. First, he draws the outside world into himself as a foreign object. But he then, in his own way and by means of the faculties at his disposal, gives it back as a free and self-organized object.

For he organizes the entire subject matter supplied by observation into an ideal form for the imagination. And the world around him does not appear to him to be anything other than a completely individual, living, and harmonious whole consisting of multifarious forms, a whole that is self-adequate and nowhere confined or dependent. In this way he imbues it with his own inner and best nature and transforms it into a being with which he is able to sympathize completely.

(H, vol. 2: 142)

At first, glance this passage does indeed recall the poetic creativity of the Vichian imaginative universals. According to Vico's theory, the imagination of primitive humans transformed the objects they perceived such that the objects appeared to have been made by the humans themselves. This is how the first poets transformed natural objects and phenomena into gods. To return to Humboldt, the above passage evidences the centrality of imagination to his thought. He conceives of imagination as *poiētēs*, the creative ability of humans in general (and not just of poets in a narrow sense) to appropriate the world and thereby to create something new, which indeed recalls the pivotal role imagination plays in Vico's theory. Yet Humboldt's text on Goethe's *Herrmann und Dorothea* is informed by a different notion of imagination than the one we associate with Vico.⁴

Vico's concept of fantasia (imagination)

As we saw in the previous chapter, Vico defines imagination as "nothing but extended or compounded memory" (§211). This definition represents a continuation of Vico's remarks on memory and imagination in *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* (Vico 1988b: 95–6).⁵ In his commentary on the *New Science*, Nicolini notes the similarity between the Vichian and Hobbesian conceptions of imagination (Nicolini 1978, 1: 90). In a subsequent paragraph of the *Third New Science*, Vico defines the relation between memory and imagination more precisely by relating imagination to invention: "Imagination . . . is nothing but the springing up again of reminiscences, and ingenuity or invention is nothing but the working over of what is remembered" (§699).⁶

Vico addresses the triad of memory, imagination, and invention again at §819, which underscores the powerful memories of children and primitive humans: early peoples—who were "almost all body and almost no reflection"—were all "vivid sensation," "strong imagination," "sharp wit," and "robust memory": "It is true that these faculties appertain to the mind, but they have their roots in the body and draw their strength from it" (§819). These faculties rooted in the body represent memory's three aspects. They are "memory when it remembers things, imagination when it alters or imitates them, and invention when it gives them a new turn or puts them into proper arrangement and relationship" (§819). Imagination and invention are thus levels of memory that distance themselves from perceived and remembered objects. Invention orders and systematizes. As Di Cesare has shown, it is the ability to discover analogies (Di Cesare 1988). Imagination, which gives things a new turn, appears to operate more freely than invention. In any case, Vico construes invention and imagination as forms of memory and consequently as dependent on what is recollected. In *On the Most Ancient Wisdom*, Vico asserts explicitly that fiction depends on the memory of perceptions: "we can feign only

what we remember and can remember only what we perceive through the senses" (Vico 1988b: 96).

Humboldt's concept of Einbildungskraft (imagination)

It is precisely the conception of imagination as a form of memory that Humboldt roundly criticizes. He encounters this traditionally empiricist notion (Nicolini, we remember, pointed out Vico's conceptual proximity to Hobbes) not in the writings of Vico but in those of Condillac. While reading Condillac's *Traité des sensations* (*A Treatise on the Sensations*), Humboldt jots down the following on June 4, 1798, in his polyglot Parisian diary (the German sections of which are translated into English; the French are left in French):

Imagination is only more powerful memory when it recalls objects. Page 204. The largest extension of imagination (which recalls past impressions) occurs when *réflexion qui combine les idées* is added to it and it becomes a *faculté qui combine les qualités des objets pour en faire des ensembles, dont la nature n'offre point de modèles. Par là elle prouve des jouissances qui, à certains égards, l'emportent sur la réalité même.*

(H, vol. 14: 504)

In *On the Most Ancient Wisdom*, Vico also alludes to new arrangements of the properties of previously perceived objects (like hippogriffs and centaurs) as typical creations of the imagination (Vico 1988b: 96). Humboldt concludes the above diary entry by remarking that this is the extent of French knowledge of productive imagination. The French conception of imagination does not, it seems to him, encompass the creation of unreal entities, but only new mental combinations of the properties of real entities (H, vol. 14: 504).⁷ Yet the creation of the unreal is precisely what Humboldt is interested in. For him, it forms the imagination's core competency, a conception that sets him apart from Condillac and, by extension, from Vico, who also conceives of imagination as a higher form of memory that is dependent on sensory perception. Two features of Humboldt's notion of the imaginative creation of the unreal distinguish it from more traditional conceptions of imagination.

First, imagination has a different position within the Kantian philosophical system (Humboldt's intellectual starting point) than it does within the empirical system (which informs Vico's emphasis on imagination's corporeality). In the empiricist model, imagination is one of the higher stages of sensory perception's gradual refinement into reason. But in the Kantian model, which is neither evolutionary nor hierarchical, imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) is the faculty that synthesizes and mediates

between the two main cognitive faculties, sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*) and understanding (*Verstand*).

Elsewhere I have sought to demonstrate that from the beginning Humboldt's entire project revolves around Kant's notion of the synthesis performed by imagination.⁸ What strikes me as particularly fascinating and modern (and decidedly un-Kantian) is that in Humboldt's early philosophical writings on imagination he attempts to show that human sexual relations provide the primeval instantiation of this human synthetic faculty. Sexual concourse is Humboldt's paradigm for all artistic and intellectual creativity. His concept of imagination as the conjoining of sensibility and understanding is modeled on sexual fecundity.

Second, Humboldt's notion that the imagination creates unreal objects is not a case of the imagination transforming objects, à la Condillac and Vico, into hippogriffs and centaurs or magnifying them into giants. The creative mind does not need to distance itself from reality. It distances itself much more radically from reality merely by creating an image. Crucial is the transformation of reality (*das Wirkliche*) into an image (*Bild*) (H, vol. 2: 126). The artist's creativity recreates reality as a "free and self-organized object" (H, vol. 2: 142). Works of art constitute a new reality, a new world with which artists are able to sympathize—meaning that they rediscover themselves in it—because they constructed it themselves.

But Humboldt's notion of the creation of the unreal does not end with the artist's contemplation of the world he or she has made. What is central to and new about Humboldt's theory is the idea that the artist must take his creation and "direct it at the subject he wants to affect [*an das Subject wenden . . . , auf das er wirken will*]" (H, vol. 2: 126). In other words, creative imagination not only concerns the subject-object relation, but from the outset stands in relation to others. The creation of the unreal is a joint creation. The point is to use the imagination to ignite the imagination (H, vol. 2: 127). Only when this has been achieved has something poetic been created. Artistic imagination is similar to language in that it is always directed at others.

With even greater clarity than in his book on Goethe's *Herrmann and Dorothea*, Humboldt underscores the intersubjective and communicative aspect of his theory of imagination in an article he wrote about the book in French.⁹ The article was intended to introduce the French intellectual public—which was still much influenced by Condillac's philosophy—to the book's main ideas:

Ce n'est donc pas tant son objet qu'il [le poète] doit altérer, c'est moi plutôt, moi qui le vois ou l'entends, qui dois éprouver un changement si merveilleux, que me trouvant au milieu de la nature, je me sente néanmoins élevé au dessus d'elle . . . C'est

donc à mon imagination qu'il faut qu'il s'adresse, et tout son talent ne consiste qu'à l'échauffer et à la diriger.

(H, vol. 3: 2)

In this essay, Humboldt acknowledges what we might call French or Vichian notions of imagination. However, these are levels of the imagination at which it has not yet exceeded the confines of reality (H, vol. 3: 5). Humboldt describes the first level as follows: "L'imagination ne change rien aux objets, mais elle se contente de les transporter dans d'autres lieux, d'autres temps ou d'autres circonstances" (H, vol. 3: 4). It is tempting here to think of Vico's concept of invention, which gives objects a "new turn" or "puts them into proper arrangement and relationship" (§819). The second level "altère les objets eux-mêmes, les compose de parties différentes, quelquefois hétérogènes, et forme des êtres dont la nature ne lui offre que les éléments" (H, vol. 3: 4). This corresponds quite closely to Vico's concept of *fantasia*.

But these transformations of real objects remain governed by the laws inherent in the objects themselves. True imagination liberates itself from the limitations of reality, and the artist transports us to a new world (H, vol. 3: 5). And this "surprising metamorphosis" only succeeds through the inner transformation of the person affected by the artistic creation:

En méditant sur les moyens par lesquels le poète peut opérer la métamorphose étonnante dont nous venons de parler, on sent bien que pour la produire il doit en opérer une au dedans de nous-mêmes . . . Il doit donc agir sur nos pensées et sur nos sentimens, et nous donner, pour ainsi dire, des organes différens de ceux qui guident nos pas dans le cours ordinaire de la vie.

(H, vol. 3: 5)

This is made possible by the assertion that all humans are creators, that all readers are poets (H, vol. 3: 2). Or, in the fulminant terms of the essay's opening sentence: "Le domaine du poète est l'imagination; il n'est poète qu'en fécondant la sienne, il ne se montre tel qu'en échauffant la nôtre" (H, vol. 3: 1). Terms like *féconder* and *échauffer* not only recall the sexual paradigm that informs Humboldt's theory of imagination, they also underscore the intersubjectivity that forms the basis of his theory of artistic creation. That this linguistic and communicative conception of art is also the starting point of Humboldt's language theory requires little further explication. For Humboldt, language is another form of the same intersubjective and creative force that his entire oeuvre seeks to describe and understand.

For me, the altered and elevated systematic position of the imagination, its liberation from the almost exclusively corporeal faculties of perception

and memory, the emphasis on the new reality of its creations, and its intersubjectivity clearly distinguish Humboldt's concept of imagination from Vico's. Nevertheless, I would again like to stress that these are differences within the context of a broad similarity, since Humboldt and Vico view the imagination as humans' creative core. In this early work on aesthetics, Humboldt employs the traditional opposition between language and art. Here, he views language as a faculty that is dependent on understanding and that produces arbitrary signs. It is not until his turn toward language study during his journey through the Basque region that Humboldt will also conceive language as a form of poetic imagination.¹⁰ As language, however, imagination does not produce images, but rather semiotic entities that are "image and sign in one [*zugleich Abbild und Zeichen*]"; namely, words (Humboldt 1997: 19).

From *favola* to *favella*

"Logic" comes from *logos*, whose first and proper meaning was *fabula*, fable, carried over into Italian as *favella*, speech. In Greek the fable was also called *mythos*, myth, whence comes the Latin *mutus*, mute. For speech was born in mute times as mental [or sign] language, which Strabo in a golden passage says existed before vocal or articulate [language]; whence *logos* means both word and idea.

(§401)

As the above passage suggests, for Vico speech (*favella*) is grounded in fable (*favola*) and myth, which brings us to the topic of the imaginative foundation of language. According to Apel, the semiotic consequence of Vico's notion of language's poetic origin is that he subscribes to a *physei* theory of language that conceives of words as, to put it in Humboldt's words, image and sign in one (Apel 1980: 374). This locution is taken from Humboldt's 1820 Academy Lecture on the comparative study of language. The complete quotation reads as follows:

For language is image and sign in one, neither wholly the product of the impression created by the objects nor wholly the product of an arbitrary choice by the speaker, and hence all individual languages bear in all of their elements traces of their quality as an image.

(Humboldt 1997: 19)

On reading this, anyone familiar with Vico would probably think of §444 in the *Third New Science*:

The philologists have all accepted with an excess of good faith the view that in the vulgar languages meanings were fixed by convention. On the contrary, because of their natural origins, they must have had natural significations. This is easy to observe in vulgar Latin (which is more heroic than vulgar Greek, and therefore as much more robust as the latter is more refined), which has formed almost all of its words by metaphors drawn from natural objects according to their natural properties or sensible effects. And in general metaphor makes up the great body of the language among all nations.

(§444)

There is absolutely no doubt that both Vico and Humboldt criticize the notion of the arbitrary sign. They belong to an explicitly anti-Aristotelian (and later anti-Cartesian) current of European thought that begins during the Humanistic era, is gradually rediscovered by the empiricists, is renewed by Leibniz, and spans the entire eighteenth century with the likes of Charles de Brosses and Condillac. Vico pointedly rejects the maxim that “in the vulgar languages meanings were fixed by convention” as the view of Aristotelian philologists (§444). He subsequently castigates grammarians who reason “from the principles of Aristotle” (§455). In Humboldt’s works one repeatedly finds polemic statements directed against the notion that language is arbitrary. Humboldt describes such an approach to language studies as dead and sterile and dismisses it as a view typical of the ancients (H, vol. 6: 119). But the undeniable similarities between Vico and Humboldt harbor important differences; the remainder of this chapter is devoted to elucidating a number of them.

Chronology versus functionality

At §444 quoted above, Vico emphasizes that metaphor is an important part of language in general. The passage thus would seem to provide evidence for the view that Vico construes language to function iconically or poetically. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that Vico writes about natural signification in the past tense. In the modern age, language is conventional, consisting of “words agreed upon by the peoples” (§32). This is the result of a diachronic process that gradually distances language from the “metaphors drawn from natural objects according to their natural properties or sensible effects” (§444). Vico’s point is that the conventionality that characterizes mankind’s third stage of development grew out of its natural, corporeal, passionate, and pre-intellectual beginnings, even though these origins may lie buried. The conventionality of modern languages is the heritage of natural, symbolic, and imaginative semiosis. It is the result of modern humans’ being “absolute lords” over the divine and

heroic languages of the past (§32). As has often been noted, Vico's theory amounts to a chronology of language formation.

Humboldt, by contrast, rejects conjectural histories of human language development and approaches the question of language origin transcendently rather than diachronically. In other words, when Humboldt asserts that language is image and sign in one, it is primarily a statement about how language functions and about the essence of language, not about chronology or glottodiachrony. The discussion about the fundamental opposition between Vichian chronology and Humboldtian functionality has benefited considerably from inquiries into whether Vico's glottogonic perspective can be interpreted functionally. Lia Formigari, for one, has asked whether mythopoesis, the metaphoric process that is the active principle of the origin of language, can also be viewed as the principle of the way language functions (Formigari 1987: 63). The "also" is important. For it would be a mistake to ignore Vico's glottodiachronic perspective or to reduce it to an exclusively functional interpretation.¹¹ According to Formigari, a positive response on the functionalist question would require that one be able to discern in Vico's theoretical model the turn in the philosophy of language that is usually associated with Humboldt (Formigari 1987: 63). Formigari's response is affirmative; that is, she demonstrates that despite the undeniable dominance of the chronological perspective in Vico's discussion of language's movement from natural images to words that are no longer recognizably iconic, Vichian metaphoric activity must also be viewed as a permanent, functional feature of language. But this interpretation, which moves Vico closer to Humboldt, also brings us to another dissimilarity between their theories.

Body, spirit, and sign

According to Vico, humanity, on its journey from corporeality to ever-greater spirituality, must leave behind its poetic and imaginative origins and transform a language consisting of symbols into a language consisting of signs.¹² But because humans will always remain flesh and can never achieve pure spirituality (though this remains their goal), words can never fully become signs. That is, human language will always retain a trace of its poetic, imaginative, natural, and corporeal origins. Yet this also implies that Vico ultimately views the poetic, mythical, and iconic features of human language as drawbacks and imperfections. He certainly does not revel in them in a romantic, postromantic, or neoromantic vein. The body's presence in language is a *dura necessità*, a harsh necessity that prevents language from ever consisting completely of signs.

Vico's essentially negative take on human language's poetic properties, and his yearning for the absolute spirituality of the sign, is radically different from Humboldt's view. Humboldt explicitly rejects the notion that

language tends to develop toward increasing semioticity. Depending on the “disposition of [one’s] mind,” the fact that a word is simultaneously an image and a sign enables one

to take the word more as image or sign. The mind can, through its capacity for abstraction, understand the word as the latter, but it can also open wide all the doors of its receptiveness and register the full effect of the singular material of language.

(Humboldt 1997: 19)

Yet the “semiotic” (*zeichenhaft*) usage of language that is necessary in certain spheres of life like commerce and science is, when it predominates, a symptom of language’s decline.¹³ One could add that it is not desirable from a political or historical perspective that humanity move in the direction of pure rationality and semioticity. This is precisely the reason why Humboldt, despite his overall enthusiasm for the French Revolution, criticizes its rationalistic attempts to regulate human affairs.

For Humboldt, mind–body dualism is not an antagonism that must be resolved by achieving a higher level of spirituality, but a tension from which emerges everything that humans create. For him, mind and body have equally positive connotations. So it is not an imperfection that words are images and signs in one, but is in fact an example of humanity at its best, a synthesis of body and mind. Language corresponds to an “act of cognition requiring the undivided powers of man” (Humboldt 1997: 20).

Symbol–word–sign

It is certainly legitimate to contend that Vico and Humboldt conceive of the word as image and (arbitrary) sign in one. According to Vico, the people are the “absolute lords” of words (§32). This is, of course, one of the meanings of “arbitrary.” Words also have a symbolic or iconic past that is, one could say, sublated dialectically. According to Humboldt’s spin on Kant’s concept of imagination, words are products of the receptivity of sensibility (and, as such, are images) and products of the spontaneity of understanding (and, as such, are signs). Because it is transcendental, this linguistic productivity has no past. Yet it is precisely the past that repeatedly catches up with Vico’s language theory and that is the source of the semiotic differences that distinguish it from Humboldt’s.

According to Vico, the symbolic relation between signifier and signified is preserved “in brief” in the words of vulgar languages by means of the predicative structure of heroic symbols (§445).¹⁴ In this sense, words are “condensed heroic expressions” (§445). They represent speech (*favella*) that has been derived from fables (*fabula*), as Vico explains at the beginning of the Poetic Logic (§401). No element of Humboldt’s theory of

language production corresponds to Vico's notion of the attenuation and contraction of fable to speech. For Humboldt, the iconic or symbolic aspect of language is due to sensibility's role in language production and particularly to a structural property of words, not to a diachronic connection with a mythic substratum.

In the detailed remarks on the semiotic structure of words in the *Grundzüge des allgemeinen Sprachtypus*, Humboldt aims to establish that words have a semiotic structure *sui generis* that distinguishes them from symbols and signs. The point is not only that a word is both image and sign in one, but that it is ultimately neither the one nor the other (H, vol. 5: 428). Language's synthesis of word and concept stands in opposition to the sign's loose linkage between expression and content. Expression and content exist independently of one another in the sign. On the one hand is the content (which can be signified by an infinite variety of expressions). On the other hand is the expression (which can signify an infinite variety of contents). Words share the indivisible linkage between expression and content that is characteristic of symbols. But words differ from symbols, since they are characterized by a different type of linkage between expression and content. In the case of the symbol, expression and content fuse with one another such that essentially only the expression remains. In the symbol, the expression "incorporates" the content (H, vol. 5: 428).¹⁵ In the case of words, expression and content refer to one another without merging with one another. They remain discrete, since the expression does not exist for its own sake, but only functions to generate the content (H, vol. 5: 429).

The simultaneous inseparability and discreteness of expression and content is the specific structural and semiotic property of words. To my knowledge, Humboldt is the first theorist to recognize clearly what modern linguists refer to as double articulation.¹⁶ Using the terminology of traditional philosophical discourse, Humboldt still calls the so-called first articulation—the division into morphemes or, in his words, "portions of thought [*Portionen des Denkens*]"—"reflection" (H, vol. 7: 581). He refers to the second partition—the division into phonemes—as "articulation." The production of a word thus amounts to the synthetic creation of both articulations, reflection and articulation. The one never takes place without the other.

Regarding the first structural and semiotic aspect of words—the synthetic combination of expression and content—it is clear that Vico's concept of the word corresponds structurally to Humboldt's concept of the sign. Under Humboldt's definition, the signified has an existence independent of its sign (H, vol. 5: 428). The same applies to Vico's notion of the word. Vico states explicitly in the quotation from the beginning of the *Poetic Logic* that "speech was born in mute times as mental [or sign] language, which Strabo in a golden passage says existed before vocal or

articulate [language]" (§401). Divine providence, of course, placed thought above speech, "for it is an eternal property of religions that they attach more importance to meditation than to speech" (§401). Vico definitely conceives of ideas as having an existence independent of words. In Humboldt's terms, the Vichian idea (*favola*) has a "semiotic" relation to the word (*favella*). Thoughts, in Vico's model, are manifestly not formed simultaneously and synthetically as words.

The sign structure that is fundamental to *logos*, which is first an idea and then an expression, also applies to the mute, inarticulate, visually perceived ("written") symbols of the early stages of human development: the gestures, objects, and comparisons of heroic language. Here, too, the content—the idea (*favola*)—is first formed in the mind as "mental language" and then denoted. Initially, there is a natural or iconic relation between these two essentially independent entities, a relation that subsequently becomes less and less iconic. Idea and expression remain, however, separate (Humboldt would say "isolated") entities. In Humboldtian terminology, their relation is "semiotic."

Vico consequently does not perceive the second structural aspect of words; namely, their double articulation. Even Vico's notion of articulation (*articolazione*), which is characteristic of the language of the third stage of human development, has nothing to do with double articulation. As we have seen, Vichian articulation merely refers to vocal language in contrast to the mute and visual languages of earlier epochs. It does not refer to the articulation of vocal production into morphemes and phonemes. Moreover, the notion of reflection as a second articulation that divides thought into portions seems to me to be completely alien to Vico's theory, which conceives of primitive thought as stories, fables, myths, and the animation of objects.

For both Vico and Humboldt, words remain signs and images in one. But it is Humboldt who first has the semiotic insight that for precisely this reason words are neither signs nor images, but rather semiotic entities whose specific nature is different from both. By identifying the locus between image and sign Vico discovers the site of language (*favella*). Vico conceives of the site of language as a path that leads from image (*favola*) to sign, a path that incidentally never arrives at its goal, the pure spirituality of the sign. But Humboldt recognizes that the way to language is a *via media* that does not and cannot lead to the sign, but rather to *favella* itself.

The common mental dictionary and the comparative study of language

The final section of this chapter considers Apel's assertion that Vico's concept of the common mental dictionary is "doubtless" a forerunner of

Humboldt's program of the comparative study of languages and the different world-views they reflect (Apel 1980: 376). There is indeed no doubt that Vico's project of constructing a "mental vocabulary common to all the various articulate languages" (§162) is based on his insight that individual languages have "diverse aspects" (§161) or "different points of view" (§445). This is also the starting point of Humboldt's encyclopedic comparative study of language. Both projects have their origin in the two writers' critique of the traditional notion that languages consist of arbitrary material signifiers for ideas that are the same across all languages. The only reason it is necessary for Vico to construct a common mental dictionary is because individual languages contain "diverse aspects" of objects. And the only reason it is possible to get from the "different words" to "certain unities of ideas" is because words were not originally arbitrary, but natural and iconic:

And for this reason we excogitated, in the first edition of this work, an Idea of a Mental Dictionary for assigning meanings to all the different articulate languages, reducing them all to certain unities of ideas in substance, which, considered from various points of view, have come to be expressed by different words in each.

(§445)

For his part, Humboldt never tires of emphasizing that the study of language only makes sense if one surrenders the notion that language consists of arbitrary signs. For then, language diversity is not merely a matter of "sounds and signs but ultimately of interpretations of the world" (Humboldt 1997: 18). And this is what makes language study interesting in the first place:

Only in this way can such research lead to a view of languages which sees them less and less as arbitrary signs and which instead attempts to discover aspects in the peculiarities of their structure, which might help us to investigate and recognize truth, and develop and educate the mind and the character in a manner which affects our intellectual existence more deeply.

(Humboldt 1997: 21)

The Vico and Humboldt passages quoted above reveal how diametrically opposed their two projects are. Vico does not concern himself with the peculiarities of individual languages' structures or with a comparison of their different world-views. On the contrary, he is interested in getting beyond languages' different points of view in order to arrive at a "mental language common to all nations, which *uniformly* grasps the substance of

things feasible in human social life" (§161, my emphasis). Vico is intent on deconstructing the "diverse modifications" (§161); that is, on crossing them out, effacing them in such a way that they are still visible themselves, yet simultaneously afford a view of the common fund of ideas.¹⁷

The project of the common mental dictionary, of a lexicon of the ideas common to all nations, again demonstrates that Vico's insight into the different world-views represents only a partial break with the Aristotelian tradition. Like Condillac, who sees the "genius of languages" in their respective "accessory ideas" to the fundamental ideas that all humans share (Condillac 2001: 185), Vico gets stuck halfway in his critique of the arbitrary sign. In his reconstruction of the history of the gentile nations, Vico does not contest biblical revelation and consequently constructs two different language histories. To a certain extent, the common mental dictionary is therefore the pagan counterpart to the Adamic language that Leibniz attempts to reconstruct.¹⁸

The motivation for and the objective of Humboldt's comparative study of languages are diametrically opposed to Vico's reconstruction of the common mental dictionary. Humboldt would probably refer to Vico's lexicon as a "chimerical notion," his term of abuse for inquiries into language origin. Humboldt, of course, also considers all languages similar, since they represent an aspect of human nature. But he also considers references to a common human language to be an intellectual abstraction, since language actually only appears in the highly individual guise of dialects (H, vol. 6: 240). The objective of the comparative study of languages, then, is not to reconstruct an original set of primitive ideas that can still be perceived in individual languages through a deconstruction of their diverse aspects. Indeed, the comparative study of languages systematically reveals in the diversity of human languages. It does not aim to deconstruct the different world-views, but rather to construct—and this means to understand and retain—their precious individuality. For each language presents the quintessence of language "from its own specific perspective" in the same way that each Greek god presents "the general idea which, as the simultaneous epitome of everything sublime, cannot itself be individualized" (Humboldt 1997: 21–2). Human language, which is precisely the totality of every conceivable language, only manifests itself in the diversity of all languages. Such a concept perforce implies the rejection of the reconstruction of a common mental dictionary of all languages.

Nevertheless, we ought not to forget that Humboldt's philosophy of language is built on a universalistic foundation which prevents it from sinking into linguistic relativism. For Humboldt, the world that language depicts is the same for everyone, the human mind is equipped with universal categories, and language therefore has universal traits that can be described in a universal, "philosophical" grammar, a notion that Hum-

boldt never surrendered. It is always from this universal perspective that Humboldt views language diversity. Vico, whose perspective is more antiquated—and at the same time more modern—starts with individual languages and scratches away their surface to find out what they have in common.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

- 1 On the history of the term “sematology,” see Achim Eschbach’s foreword to the 1987 edition of Gätschenberger’s *Grundzüge einer Psychologie des Zeichens*, which was originally published in 1901 (Gätschenberger 1987: x).
- 2 Interestingly, Locke serendipitously proposes “semeiotikè” as an alternate term for “logic” (Locke 1964: 309). In a kind of Lockean parallel, my usage of sematology is synonymous with Vico’s term “poetic logic.”

I MR. VICO, RENATO, AND PHILOLOGY

- 1 The *Discours de la méthode* was published anonymously in Leiden in 1637 in order to evade censorship. But this is surely not the only reason for Descartes’s silence on matters relating to time and place. See also Hegel’s insights into the first person singular from the *Phenomenology*: “In the same way when I say ‘I,’ ‘this individual I,’ I say quite generally ‘all I’s,’ every one is what I say every one is ‘I,’ this individual I” (Hegel 1955: 154).
- 2 Descartes explicitly refers to his autobiographical narrative as a fable: “But I am presenting this work only as a history or, if you prefer, a fable” (D: 111).
- 3 Vico adopts Renato’s own words: “I resolved to pretend [*feindre*] that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams” (D: 127).
- 4 That said, in both the 1725 and 1744 editions of the *New Science*, Descartes’s name is only mentioned once and in an insignificant context.
- 5 Stephan Otto writes in this regard of an “Umformung der Philosophie des Descartes [recasting of Descartes’s philosophy]” (Otto 1978: 233).
- 6 For a detailed examination of Vico’s axiom, see Fellmann (1976).
- 7 The *First New Science* only applies the axiom to the early gentile nations, whereas the subsequent editions apply it to the civil world generally.
- 8 Vico’s remarks about the two conceits gives a characteristically Vichian spin to Francis Bacon’s critique of the “idols” in the *Novum Organum* (Bacon 1994: §§58–62).
- 9 “For a long time I had observed . . . that in practical life it is sometimes necessary to act upon opinions which one knows to be quite uncertain just as if they were indubitable” (D: 126). Descartes’s first ethical maxim is thus “to obey the laws and customs of my country” (D: 122). Descartes’s provisional ethics is of course sharply opposed to his rigorous search for truth, a search that rejects everything that is attended by doubt.

- 10 See Blumenberg (1989), particularly p. 99.
- 11 As the latest research increasingly makes clear, traditional European Aristotelian language theory is not the real Aristotle. See Lo Piparo (1988).
- 12 *Ad placitum* is one of the Latin renderings of Aristotle's *kata synthēken*. See Coseriu (1967) for a history of this concept.
- 13 Sperone Speroni's 1542 *Dialogo delle lingue* offers an overview of the various positions in this linguistic and cultural debate.
- 14 See Dalgarno (2001) and Wilkins (1968).
- 15 See, for example, Mounin (1967: 139).
- 16 For a discussion of the history of this principle, see Löwith (1986: 86).
- 17 See Cantelli (1990: 95): "tutti questi umani comportamenti sono segni linguistici." I disagree, however, with Cantelli's view that these signs are *linguistic* signs.
- 18 In 1911, Benedetto Croce described Vico's theory of poetic characters as his cardinal error. More recently, Donald Verene has again taken Vico's interpretation of his discovery seriously and insisted that the poetic characters comprise the key element of Vico's *New Science* (Verene 1981: 65). This is taken for granted in the linguistic readings of Vico that have appeared in the wake of Pagliaro (1959).
- 19 This is why Vico's transformation of Cartesian philosophy can more readily be compared with Peirce's semiotic transformation of Kantian philosophy than with Humboldt's project. Though it does not mention Vico, Susanne Rohr's book on Peirce points up many of the ways in which Peirce is similar Vico (Rohr 1993).

2 VICO'S DISCOVERY: POETIC CHARACTERS

- 1 See Trabant (1986: 190–2).
- 2 His stated intention of writing with the candor proper to a historian notwithstanding, here, too, Vico is unable to elude the Cartesian paradigm. For, taken as whole, Vico's *Autobiography* is also a history of an exemplary individual and, consequently, a poetic character. It does not confine itself to the historical individual Vico, but makes claims for universal validity.

3 GESTURES AND OBJECTS (*SĒMATA*), WORDS

- 1 See Nöth (1990: 44–5).
- 2 The *Third New Science* is organized such that the main themes are treated at least four times: first, in the introductory explanation of the frontispiece; second, in the first book containing the principles; third, in the second book explaining "poetic wisdom" at length; and finally in the fourth book that serves as a summation.
- 3 See Nöth (1990: 41).
- 4 See Trabant (1991: 121ff.).
- 5 If it can be heard at all, the language is a type of singing that does not yet play a significant role. I shall return to this topic in Chapter 6.
- 6 On the difficulty of translating *ingenium* into English, see L.M. Palmer's discussion in Vico (1988b: 96). Palmer proposes "ingenuity, inventiveness, mother wit" as possible translations.
- 7 See Niemetz (1987).
- 8 See Coseriu (1972: 127–8).
- 9 See Trabant (1983, 1988).

- 10 *Ious* is supposed to have led to the Latin word *ius* (right, law, justice). On the etymology of *ius*, see the chapter “*ius* and the Oath in Rome” in Benveniste (1973: 389–98).
- 11 On this distinction, see Kamlah and Lorenzen (1984: 35–6).
- 12 See Coseriu (1967).

4 THE COMMON MENTAL DICTIONARY

- 1 See Martinet (1964) and Trabant (1993).
- 2 See Klein (1992: 297–8).
- 3 See Klein (1992: 314–15).

5 TO SPEAK BY WRITING (DERRIDA–ROUSSEAU)

- 1 See my conversation with Dietmar Kamper on the future of language: Kamper and Trabant (1990).
- 2 On the history of this pair of terms, see the collection of essays edited by Volker Kapp (Kapp 1990).
- 3 Johann Georg Hamann is another important author in the “grammatological” tradition. See Wetzel (1981, 1983) and Trabant (1992).
- 4 The 1998 (corrected) edition of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* quotes the passage in question as follows: “Philologists [Derrida’s version would incorrectly read ‘philosophers’] have believed . . .” (Derrida 1998: 335). It also directs the reader to the correct page of the Bergin and Fisch translation of the *Third New Science*.
- 5 The reconstruction is made more difficult by the fact that Derrida overlooks the reference to the second volume of the *Third New Science* as well as the reference to the *First New Science*. Derrida quotes §472 from Jules Michelet’s translation. See Michelet (1971, vol. 1: 490).

6 TO SPEAK BY SINGING (HERDER)

- 1 Strabo is quoted by Rousseau (R/H: 141) and Vico (§401), though in the latter case as a compurgator for his other theory, namely, that mute language preceded spoken language. Wolfgang Proß, who edited Herder’s essay, proposes that the singing–speaking hypothesis goes back to Pseudo-Longinus’ *On the Sublime* (where, however, I am unable to find it) (Herder 1978: 128). Vico also refers to Pseudo-Longinus as a source for the onomatopoeical origins of language; but Fausto Nicolini maintains that Vico has his source wrong (Nicolini 1978, vol. 1: 183). Bergin and Fisch are probably correct to suggest that Vico’s source is Demetrius’ *On Style* (§447).
- 2 Condillac considers music—what you and I know as singing, in other words—to be, like language itself, a later development of the cries of the passions.
- 3 See Trabant (1991).
- 4 On the linguistic and semiotic differences between onomatopoeia and interjections, see Trabant (1983, 1988).
- 5 See Trabant (1990a: 182–4).

7 MEMORIA–FANTASIA–INGEGNO

- 1 In Germany, Aleida and Jan Assmann have been at the forefront of this issue, with all its cultural and political implications. See Assmann *et al.* (1983), Assmann and Hölscher (1988), Schmidt (1991), and Haverkamp and Lachmann (1993). An earlier version of this chapter appeared in the latter.
- 2 Metaphors of abyss are central to discussions about memory. Forgetting is frequently represented as a plunge into an oblivion that Hegel describes at §453 of the *Encyclopedia* as the “night-like mine or pit [*nächtlicher Schacht*]” of memory (Hegel 1998: 298). On metaphors of memory, see Weinrich (1964).
- 3 Hermann Ebbinghaus’s *Über das Gedächtnis* (1885) is usually cited as the foundational text of psychological memory research.
- 4 The *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*’s article “Gedächtnis” (Ritter and Gründer 1971–ongoing, vol. 3: 35–42), which actually ought to be entitled “Memory,” provides an overview of psychological research through the 1970s. The *Wörterbuch* treats the philosophical aspects of *memoria* in its article “Erinnerung” (Ritter and Gründer 1971–ongoing, vol. 2: 636–43). This creates a division between (psychological) *Gedächtnis* and (philosophical) *Erinnerung* that never actually obtained in the history of philosophy.
- 5 In the tradition of the French social-psychologist Maurice Halbwachs, Gérard Namer doubts whether there is such a thing as individual memory. Each person’s memory is social—which does not mean “collective”—and cannot form itself without those of other people. Namer speaks in this regard of an “origine sociale de la mémoire individuelle” (Namer 1987: 21). The constructivist school of memory research deals with similar issues. See the essays by Peter Hejl and Dirk Baecker in Schmidt (1991).
- 6 Stephan Otto likewise attaches great importance to this fact in his transcendental-philosophical interpretation. See Otto (1989: 127).
- 7 See Harald Weinrich’s article “Ingenium” in Ritter and Gründer (1971–ongoing, vol. 4: 360–3).
- 8 In the chapter on the mental faculties in *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* Vico discusses “Memory and Imagination” and “Ingenium” in separate subsections (Vico 1988b: 95–7). Vico’s *Art of Rhetoric* makes the same distinction (Vico 1996).
- 9 Fausto Nicolini points out in his commentary (a) that only an extremely willful reading of Cicero and Quintilian would support Vico’s assertion for classical Latin and (b) that in the case of medieval Latin Vico’s interpretation of the passage in Cola di Rienzo is inaccurate. See Nicolini (1978, vol. 1: 305ff.).
- 10 After *perceptio* and *iudicium*, the third classical mental operation is *ratiocinatio*. Its art is “method.” “The three mental operations (perception, judgment, reasoning) are directed by the three arts (topics, criticism, method)” (Vico 1988b: 97).
- 11 See Ong (1982: 57–68).
- 12 See Kamper and Trabant (1990). Harald Weinrich reminded his audience of the importance of memory for language, and consequently for culture in general, in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France. See Weinrich (1989, 1990).
- 13 This is of course speech-based writing and not the primitive writing of mankind’s second stage of development, the writing with visual *semata*.
- 14 “*Ingenium* is the faculty that connects disparate and diverse things. The Latins called it acute or obtuse, both terms being derived from geometry. An acute wit penetrates more quickly and unites diverse things” (Vico 1988b: 96–7). On the term “acute” in Vico’s philosophy, see Di Cesare (1988: 9ff.).

- 15 See Yates (1966), Blum (1969), and Rossi (1983).
- 16 Verene (1981) provides a detailed discussion of this theme.
- 17 Verene calls this process “recollective fantasia” (Verene 1981: 101). My locution, deconstructive *memoria*, means roughly the same thing and, in my opinion, better captures Vico’s etymological method.
- 18 As Herwig Blum suggests, Hegel is likely alluding to Christian Kästner’s 1805 *Mnemonik* (Blum 1969: 2).
- 19 See the almost identical passage at §700 which is part of the section on poetic physics referred to earlier in this chapter: “[W]e can now scarcely understand and cannot at all imagine how the first men thought who founded gentile humanity.”
- 20 André Leroi-Gourhan invokes this new, two-class system of post-human society in the apocalyptic vision that concludes *Gesture and Speech* (Leroi-Gourhan 1993).
- 21 See Trabandt (1986: 99–127).
- 22 The reductionist classification of Vico as an “anti-modern” is the one serious weakness of Mark Lilla’s otherwise excellent book (Lilla 1993).
- 23 Henri Meschonnic, a French language theorist, has been a particularly vehement opponent of this type of logocentrism (which is simultaneously ideocentrism and semioticism). He has contrasted what he calls the Greek ideology of the sign with the Jewish notion of the word as something corporeal into which meaning is inscribed. See Meschonnic (1982) and Trabandt (1990b).
- 24 Most so-called philosophies of language, even those that postdate Humboldt, are philosophies of signs, Hegel’s included.
- 25 See Schmitz (1964: 40).
- 26 Hegel thus sanctions and radicalizes the identification of language and sign that dates back to Augustine. At §459 of the *Encyclopedia*, he states: “and thus the truer phase of the intuition used as a sign is existence in *time* . . . This institution of the natural is the vocal note, where the inward idea manifests itself in adequate utterance” (Hegel 1998: 305).
- 27 The relation between memory and signs reflects Condillac’s insight into human cognition’s reliance on signs.

8 VICO AND HUMBOLDT ON IMAGINATION AND LANGUAGE

- 1 One of Humboldt’s key ideas is the politically conceived opposition between a speaker’s “force” (*Gewalt*) and language’s “power” (*Macht*). See Trabandt (1986).
- 2 In addition to synthesis and incorporation, there is a third way two entities can be combined: isolation. Under isolation, the two entities exist independently of one another in a political, grammatical, and philosophical sense. Isolation, according to Humboldt, is the principle of China.
- 3 See also Formigari (1987), Di Cesare (1988), and Verene (1981).
- 4 There is, in this context, no terminological difference between what Vico means by *fantasia* (imagination) and Humboldt by *Einbildungskraft* (imagination).
- 5 For a study of Vico’s conception of memory, see Verene (1981: 96–126).
- 6 See also the section on *ingenium* in Vico (1988b: 96–7).
- 7 More precisely, Condillac distinguishes between reminiscence (which does not yet refer to signs) and memory (which recalls signs). Imagination is located between reminiscence and memory. The leap to arbitrary signs takes place via imagination (see Condillac 2001: 86–8). It is not until his turn to language that Humboldt will grasp (and go beyond) Condillac’s sign-making imagination.

- 8 See Chapter 1 of Trabant (1986).
- 9 This essay is at the center of Kurt Müller-Vollmer's study of Humboldt's aesthetic theory (Müller-Vollmer 1967).
- 10 See Trabant (1986: 24–34).
- 11 Like Coseriu before her (1972: 106–7), Formigari criticizes this aspect of Pagliaro's interpretation (Formigari 1987: 66).
- 12 On the tendency of Vico's Romantic interpreters to overlook this important aspect of his theory, see Formigari (1987: 71).
- 13 Humboldt calls this the "conventional" use of language. It produces "debased rhetoric and poetry" (Humboldt 1997: 20). On the "semiotic" use of language, see Trabant (1986: 99–127).
- 14 See Di Cesare (1988) and De Mauro (1969: 290).
- 15 The triad of words, symbols, and signs is thus likewise grounded in Humboldt's fundamental conceptual triad of incorporation, synthesis, and isolation.
- 16 This is also at the center of Saussure's concept of the arbitrary sign and applies, as Tullio De Mauro has shown in his edition of the *Cours de linguistique générale*, to both the material and concept sides of the sign (Saussure 1975: 333, 386).
- 17 On "crossing out," see Derrida (1998: 23).
- 18 Like Leibniz's theory of language, Vico's common mental dictionary manifestly refers to vocabulary and—again like Leibniz's inquiries—has a heteronomous aim; namely, to reconstruct the "substance of things feasible in human social life" (§161). See Pagliaro (1959: 432).

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