VICO'S INDEBTEDNESS TO THE LATINS

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To the English speaking world the name of Giambattista Vico remained virtually unknown until the translation of his magnum opus, *The New Science*, in 1948. Since then in a steady but thin stream, learned articles and books have appeared, to emphasise and elucidate his unique contribution to knowledge and to history in particular.

But apart from incidental reference little has been written of the sources from which Vico drew both inspiration and example. Here it is clear even from a cursory glance at both his *New Science* and his *Autobiography* that although he owed much to the classical Greeks it was to ancient Latin authors that he was most indebted. *The New Science* indeed is steeped in latinity. This is not surprising since as his *De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia* amply testifies he was not unnaturally drawn towards the origins of his native tongue for his language studies from which he gained so many illuminating insights into the human past. Few scholars have in fact derived so much from a philological study of Latin in particular as did this early 18th century Neapolitan philosopher and historian. Mainly self-taught, he gained his basic education and his vast erudition mainly from Latin authors which as he tells us he devoured with avidity. Not that he did not appreciate the immense contribution that an intense study of Greek would have made to his understanding of the human past, but he early decided that it was better to master one language than to have an imperfect knowledge of several. Hence he abandoned Greek to concentrate on Latin, which he tells us had become neglected, in order to write good Latin prose. Yet if he concentrated on Latin rather than on Greek he certainly learned much of classical Greece through Roman authors. Both Latin and Greek along with Hebrew he considered to be the most learned languages to which other European tongues were analogous for their origins. But he chose Latin as his model since it was the one ancient language which showed consistently and convincingly the evolution of human institutions, especially that of law in which he was especially interested. Moreover, Latin had been the most effective and powerful means of establishing human society.

Although Latin was the language of the academic world and the tongue in

1. *The New Science* translated by T.G. Bergin & M.H. Fisch, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York 1948. (This is a translation of the third edition, 1744.) All subsequent references to this work are to its numbered paragraphs.
3. Published in 1710.
4. *Autobiography*, p.120.
which he wrote many of his minor works, including several orations. Vico wrote his *Scienza Nuova* in his native Italian. He does not explicitly indicate why he did so, but possibly he was able by contrast to point up the linguistic and semantic hypotheses that he wished to make. We may, too, fairly infer from his *Autobiography* that he wanted to command as wide a reading public as possible. But Latin commended itself especially to Vico because it above other languages was a rustic tongue with its roots manifestly in the primitive life of the forest. Moreover, on several counts he admitted it surpassed Italian.

No other language known to Vico illustrated better that language and letters arose together. But it was from Lucretius that he first learned how speech originated in gestures and words took their first written shape in hieroglyphics. On the assumption that human nature was the same everywhere he thought that there was a mental language common to all people. Hence from Latin, Vico argued, it was possible to discern the thoughts of early man.

With his vigorous, robust imagination impelled by bold hypotheses, he looked into language, and Latin in particular, with a discerning eye and saw in the etymology of words the human past incapsulated in broad generic terms. To see into words what he imagined to be there he forced himself, so he tells us, to read, inwardly digest and understand Latin authors by a process of critical self-identification with them, much in the manner, we may suppose, more recently advocated by his disciple and admirer, the English philosopher-historian, R.G. Collingwood, in his empathetic method of historical explanation.

Language, in a sense, was for Vico a point of departure for pressing back into a speculative reconstruction of the prehistoric past of primordial man. With philosophic perception he saw that early man first came to express things of the mind and spirit by using metaphorically words which he used for the body. When applied to the order of human development, from the forests, to huts and villages and finally cities with established academic institutions, this first great principle of etymology revealed a pattern in the histories of words in the various native languages. In one of his all too rare examples of his method he shows how Latin words had sylvan or rustic origins. The word ‘lex’ must first have meant, so he reasons, ‘a collection of acorns’. Hence, from ‘lex’ is derived ‘ilex’ an oak with ‘aquilex’ a collection of waters. ‘Lex’ also became, so he ingeniously continues, a collection of vegetables which were called ‘legumina’. Later, before laws assumed a written form, ‘lex’ must have been used for a collection of citizens as in a

7. *Autobiography*, p.120.
10. ibid., 702.
parliament. Finally, from its meaning as a collection of letters we get ‘legere’, to read.14

The validity of this highly speculative etymological reasoning we must leave to philologists to judge, but it does reveal his intellectual daring and the nature of his linguistic conjectures. It was by such methods that he made his great discovery that early gentile peoples (the Jews he regarded as having a separate providential origin and destiny15) were in essence poets who spoke in symbolic characters. This he tells us repeatedly was the Master Key of his ‘New Science’, the result of persistent research of almost all his literary life.16 It unlocked the door to his understanding of early man and revealed the savage mind. By a necessity of human nature poetic style arose before prose.17 Before new words came into vogue the meagre monosyllabic language of early peoples was used out of necessity to express abstract ideas metaphorically. From Latin he illustrated new principles of mythology. For example, ‘so many ears of wheat’ was used for ‘so many years’,18 while from ‘urbum’, which he says must have meant the curved moldboard of a plough, must have come ‘urbs’, a city, on the assumption that it was a plough that traced the walls or perimeter of a city.19

But apart from his deep and abiding interest in language, he was above all a legal scholar preoccupied with the study of Roman law and legal institutions from which, he argued, one could best learn of early peoples. He saw the need to study law in its social context in order to determine the circumstances from which it grew. Not only did he see that early Romans were unconsciously poets but he also saw that ancient Roman law was a serious poem.20 Intent upon constructing a general theory of law from Roman practice, which he regarded as exemplary, he sketched in brief outline the history of Roman law.21

In the course of that exercise he made another great discovery. For long he had accepted the traditional story of the Law of Twelve Tables as having come from Athens to set up popular liberty in Rome. These Tables were formerly held to be laws given by Solon to the Athenians and subsequently taken over by the Romans.22 Although this Law never existed as an official code, it became the source of fables and private law. But some years before he came to write his New Science, in his Principles of Universal Law he showed through his philological reasoning that the Law of Twelve Tables could not have come from Athens but had an indigenous origin. The false belief, which had been held by such scholars

15. *ibid.*, 168.
16. *ibid.*, 34.
17. *ibid.*, 460.
20. *ibid.*, 1036, 1037.
21. *ibid.*, 598.
as Livy and Cicero, was due to what Vico called ‘the conceit of the learned’, that contemporary knowledge is as old as the world itself and is part of the matchless wisdom of the ancients.\textsuperscript{23} It became one of Vico’s principal beliefs and one of his oft stated axioms in his \textit{New Science} that the laws of different peoples had autochthonous origins.\textsuperscript{24} The Law of the Twelve Tables was derived, he argued, from the natural customs of the Romans themselves and was ‘set down by them in bronze and guarded with religious care by Roman jurisprudence’.\textsuperscript{25}

Having disproved this false belief, Vico thought it best to follow Varro, ‘the most learned of the Romans’ and writer on Roman antiquity, and attribute Latin origins to all Roman institutions.\textsuperscript{26} He went further and concluded that all nations had separate beginnings and would have developed as they had done independently of any other nation.\textsuperscript{27}

He showed, moreover, in what he calls one of his proudest achievements, how the Twelve Tables had embodied within them the history of the natural laws of the people of Latium and were a record of their ancient customs and natural law from the age of Saturn, or the Latin age of the gods when the world was reputed to be 2500 years old.\textsuperscript{28} It was in fact the first codification of the heroic or aristocratic law of the people to become ‘the great monument of the nations of Latium’.\textsuperscript{29}

Although at pains to avoid arguing too closely from his own knowledge and its implicit assumptions, Vico was concerned to find in the history of the Roman people the key to the understanding of the history of all other peoples. Neither archivist nor indeed conventional student of history, in that he did not immerse himself in the multitudinous facts of history, he sought with penetrating insight to discern generic factors which characterised the history of all nations. It is possible that his preoccupation with the Latins and his ignorance of the history of non-European peoples led him to think that the universal application of Roman law in particular epitomised the history of humanity generally. He held that the Latin language which had been a dominant tongue throughout its development ‘should be a great witness to the customs of the early days of the world’.\textsuperscript{30} Hence, Latin would yield the general principles of the natural law of nations, as indeed would the German language which also was a dominant tongue.\textsuperscript{31}

What was equally important for his understanding of the human past was his philosophical discovery from the Latins that ‘verum’ and ‘factum’ are conver-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} ibid., 127, 128.
\item \textsuperscript{24} ibid., 146.
\item \textsuperscript{25} ibid., 154.
\item \textsuperscript{26} ibid., 284.
\item \textsuperscript{27} ibid., 311.
\item \textsuperscript{28} ibid., 154 and chronological table facing p.27.
\item \textsuperscript{29} ibid., 915.
\item \textsuperscript{30} ibid., 152.
\item \textsuperscript{31} ibid., 153.
\end{itemize}
Man comes gradually to realise that what he makes is true, for he cannot be more certain of anything than that which he himself makes. Since 'the first indubitable principle is that this world of nations has certainly been made by man', he therefore can know it. This correspondence theory of truth he supports by his belief in Aristotle's dictum 'Nihil est in intellectu quin prius fuerit in sensu'.

And it was the Germania of Tacitus that was the main source of his ethnographic material for illustrating his speculations on primitive man. Tacitus along with Plato he admired above all other learned men, though for very different reasons; for 'with an incomparable metaphysical mind Tacitus contemplates man as he is, Plato as he should be. And as Plato with his universal knowledge explores the parts of nobility which constitute the man of intellectual wisdom, so Tacitus descends into all the counsels of utility whereby, among the infinite irregular chances of malice and fortune, the man of practical wisdom brings things to good issue.' From Vergil too he learned much of heroic antiquity.

But a dominant concept of his ideal eternal history was his theory of 'corsi et ricorsi'. This historicist notion of a regular pattern in human history — a feature of his work for which he is often best and even only known — can hardly be attributed to his Latin studies. It is in fact far more likely that he is indebted to the Greeks and to the 'divine' Plato in particular with his concept of immanent purpose, for this theory of historical development, for there is little in Roman history to suggest an unfolding of a preordained order of things. With his cast of mind he could not have readily accepted the Roman limited, parochial and static conception of human history, nor could he have been happy with the cyclical view of the Greeks. It was inconceivable to him that Providence would allow man to remain solely within his man-made history. As one critic points out, the notion of 'ricorsi' is providential and romantic. Through, then, his spiral device, whereby each period is differentiated from its comparable predecessor by what separates them in time, Vico escaped from the more inflexible 'philosophies' of the ancient historians.

We can with even less confidence attribute other features of his work to the

33. N.S. 349.
34. ibid., 363.
35. N.S. contains no less than 26 such references. 584 for example.
37. N.S., 635, 732.
38. See N.S. Book Five: 'The Recurrence of Human Things in the Resurgence of the Nations'.
Latins. Although it may be tempting, for example, to see in the writings of Roman historians evidence to account for Vico's fascination with the number three, which determines his classification of so many aspects of human society, (as shown especially in his Book Four on 'The Course of Nations' in his *New Science*) we may well suspect that his predilection for three was just as likely to have been unconsciously determined by his Catholic trinitarian beliefs.

We can however say in conclusion that although there is a danger of overstating the case for Vico's indebtedness to the Latins, it can fairly be said that without his Latin studies he could not have written his *New Science*. The Romans in fact supplied him with much of the linguistic and historical data for many of his theories and were the source of most of his brilliant aperçus.