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VICO'S "DISCOVERY OF THE TRUE HOMER":
A CASE-STUDY IN HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION

BY B. A. HADDOCK

Vico's "Discovery of the true Homer" has always attracted the attention of Homeric scholars. Even in the eighteenth century, when little consideration was given to Vico's work, Cesarotti had adorned his edition of the *Poesie di Ossian* with critical notes which acknowledged the importance of Vico's work on Homer for an understanding of primitive poetry and included ample illustrative quotations from the *Scienza nuova*.¹ Ossian was to become a focus for an important debate about theories of literary criticism. There had been a long tradition of interest in the character of primitive poetry in Scotland, deriving from Shaftesbury but dominant throughout the eighteenth century; and in the German-speaking countries, particularly in Switzerland, scholars such as Bodmer and Breitinger had preserved heroic poetry as a subject worthy of serious attention. But in Germany towards the end of the century there was a resurgence of interest in modes of art despised by the Enlightenment which served to delineate the terms of reference of a debate that was at once concerned with the authenticity of the Ossian poems and the attitude of mind which it was appropriate for a critic to adopt when examining such "relics" of primitive culture.

Herder's contributions to *Von deutscher Art und Kunst* (1773) are crucial in this connection. His contention was that poetry should be considered as an expression of a way of life common to a whole people; and, with regard to Ossian, his claim was that the rationalism of Enlightenment literary criticism was completely out of place in the evaluation of an artifact derived from a *Weltanschauung* characterized by very different presuppositions.² And even though Vico's influence was (at

¹ Melchiorre Cesarotti, *Poesie di Ossian figlio di Fingal, antico poeta celtico, ultimamente scoperte, e tradotte in prosa inglese da Jacopo Macpherson, e da quella trasportate in verso italiano dall'ab. Melchior Cesarotti con varie annotazioni de' due traduttori* (Padova, 1763), 2 vols. On Cesarotti and Vico see Benedetto Croce, *Bibliografia vichiana* (Naples, 1947-48), I, 390-93.

² See esp. J. G. Herder, "Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker" in *Von deutscher Art und Kunst* (Hamburg, 1773). There is an illuminating discussion of the "discovery of the true Homer" as an illustration of Vico's distance from the ideals of the aesthetic criticism of the Enlightenment in Isaiah Berlin, "Vico and the Ideal of the Enlightenment," *Social Research*, 43 (1976), 640-53.

most) oblique, a debate had been established which was exploring recognizably Vichian themes.³ There should be no surprise, then, that Wolf, in his *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795), though ignorant of Vico, should sustain the results of Vico's studies of Homer. Later, after becoming acquainted with Vico through Cesarotti, Wolf acknowledged the priority of Vico's conclusions.⁴ In 1807, therefore, Vico's place in the philological world had been granted by the *doyen* of Homeric studies. In 1834 the "discovery of the true Homer" was translated into English by Henry Nelson Coleridge in his *Introductions to the Study of the Greek Classic Poets*.⁵ The assumption that Vico's studies of Homer could be read in disregard of the philosophical context of the *Scienza nuova* had become an orthodoxy by default. Even Vico's twentieth-

³ Robert T. Clark, Jr., "Herder, Cesarotti, and Vico," *Studies in Philology*, 44 (1947), argues for an indirect link between Vico and Herder through Cesarotti's notes to Ossian. There is no evidence of Herder's direct acquaintance with Vico's work from his publications until the *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität* (1797). See *Herders Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. B. Suphan, C. Redlich, R. Steig, et al. (Berlin, 1877-1913), XVIII, 245-46. Hamann and Goethe have been mentioned as other possible sources from whom Herder could have heard about Vico earlier in his career, but the dating of this acquaintance from these sources could not be before 1777 in the case of Hamann, and 1787 in the case of Goethe. See Benedetto Croce, *Bibliografia vichiana*, I, 364-71. Gustavo Costa, "Thomas Blackwell fra Gravina e Vico," *Bollettino del centro di studi vichiani*, V (1975), 40-55, argues, on the basis of textual comparisons between the *Scienza nuova prima* and Blackwell's *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (London, 1735), that Vico exercised a decisive (though unacknowledged) influence on Blackwell. If such a thesis could be sustained, it would help to explain the paradox, noticed by Fisch, that Vichian ideas abound in England in the eighteenth century without explicit reference to Vico's works. See Fisch's introduction to *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin (Ithaca, N.Y., 1963), 82-83. In the light of Blackwell's express admiration for Shaftesbury and Gravina, however, it would be dangerous to mistake speculative conjectures for concrete historical evidence. Blackwell, for instance, following Shaftesbury, maintained that the "naturalness" of Homer's poetry made him a model for later generations. And though, like Vico, he explored with great learning the historical background to Homer's poems, he still maintained a thesis of the perennial pedagogic priority of the "ancients." The distance between Vico and Blackwell is clearer if attention is directed to Blackwell's other works (which Costa does not cite). In those works while pursuing Vichian themes, Blackwell adopts a position which is unmistakably derived from Shaftesbury. See esp. Thomas Blackwell, *Letters Concerning Mythology* (London, 1748) and *Memoirs of the Court of Augustus* (Edinburgh and London, 1753-63), 3 vols.

⁴ In his *Museum der Alterthumswissenschaften* (1807). See Fisch's introduction to *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, 69; and Benedetto Croce, *Bibliografia vichiana*, I, 395-400.

⁵ See Henry Nelson Coleridge, *Introductions to the Study of the Greek Classic Poets* (London, 1834), 73-98; and Fisch's introduction to *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, 84.

century admirers, Croce and Nicolini, who were thoroughly versed in every aspect of his thought, have continued to evaluate Book III of the *Scienza nuova seconda* as a piece of literary criticism whose claims for attention rest on the accuracy of its portrayal of Homer and the originality of the method employed.⁶ These are important questions, but they leave open the problem of the light which Vico's discussions of Homer shed on his own theory of historical interpretation. My concern, accordingly, will be to examine the "discovery of the true Homer" as an illustration of the principles of the *Scienza nuova* applied to a specific historical problem; and, further, to offer an interpretation of those principles in the light of their practical application.

The propriety of considering the "discovery of the true Homer" in this light is enhanced by the special circumstances which surrounded its inclusion in the *Scienza nuova seconda*. The dissolution of the historical identity of Homer as the matchless poet of the heroic age had not been premeditated by Vico in the *Scienza nuova prima* of 1725; this paradox "had not even entered into our reflections when readers of the first edition of this *New Science* . . . suspected that the Homer believed in up to now was not real."⁷ Rather, it was the "metaphysical criticism of the history of the obscurest antiquity, that is, the explanation of the ideas the earliest nations naturally formed" which led Vico to assert "that Homer was an idea or a heroic character of Grecian men insofar as they told their histories in song."⁸ The specific theses advanced by Vico concerning Homer were deemed by him to follow from the principles of historical interpretation which he adumbrated in the "Elements" of the *Scienza nuova seconda*.⁹ These principles were implicit in the *Scienza nuova prima* and were the ground of his argument that the Law of the Twelve Tables could not have been transmitted from a civilized Greece to a barbarous Rome. But in the later formulation the "Elements" are stated in an abstract and axiomatic form and are given an apparent epistemological status distinct from the historical accounts in which they

⁶ Book III of the *Scienza nuova seconda* is of course entitled "Discovery of the true Homer." The most convenient Italian version is Giambattista Vico, *Opere*, ed. Fausto Nicolini (Milan and Naples, 1953), 729-67; the English translation is *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin (Ithaca, N.Y., 1968), 301-32. Henceforth citations to this edition will be to S. N., followed by the paragraph number common to both Italian and English texts. For Croce on Vico's Homer see B. Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, trans. R. G. Collingwood (London, 1913), 183-96; and Croce, "Vico e la critica omerica" in his *Saggio sullo Hegel seguito da altri scritti di storia della filosofia* (Bari, 1967), 260-73. For Nicolini see Fausto Nicolini, "Divagazione omeriche" in his *Saggi vichiani* (Naples, 1955), 55-276. Both Croce and Nicolini are concerned especially to repudiate the suggestion that D'Aubignac's Homeric studies either influenced or stand comparison with Vico's.

⁷ S. N. 873.

⁸ S. N. 905, 873.

⁹ S. N. 119-329.

were previously embodied. Vico's claim is that "just as the blood . . . in animate bodies, so will these elements course through our Science and animate it in all its reasonings about the common nature of nations."¹⁰ The "Elements," then, constitute a methodological canon which enables an historian to evaluate competing accounts of the same occurrence. In themselves they are a *pot-pourri* of axioms, "both philosophical and philological, including a few reasonable and proper postulates and some clarified definitions."¹¹ And given that their initial statement is so abbreviated, the best means of considering the character of the methodology they are recommending is to examine their implications for a specific interpretive problem. Here the "discovery of the true Homer" is particularly instructive. Vico's contention is that the principles of interpretation "now *compel* us to affirm that the same thing has happened in the case of Homer as in that of the Trojan War, of which the most judicious critics hold that though it marks a famous epoch in history it never in the world took place."¹² And while this particular example of historical reconstruction does not have such an important place in the genesis of his ideas as his studies of Roman law, it most aptly illustrates the character of his theory because it is a piece of reconstruction which is seen as a corollary of the theory.

But the importance of a careful consideration of the "discovery of the true Homer" for an understanding of the *Scienza nuova* is not exhausted by the peculiar methodological place it occupies in the structure of that work. Here, again, the organization of the *Scienza nuova seconda*, with its division into "Elements" and substantive historical theses, is deceptive. The principles which are said to inform the various essays in reconstruction which constitute the body of the *Scienza nuova* are in fact distilled from Vico's efforts to sketch a coherent picture of problematic historical episodes (such as the proper designation of the Law of the Twelve Tables in the context of early Roman history). Vico's achievement was to realize that interpretation of documents and artifacts depended on theoretical considerations about the character of the men who produced those artifacts; and the need he felt to elaborate a new science of interpretation was born of an awareness that there was something incongruous about a conception of the origins of society and civilization which presupposed the attributes of eighteenth-century civility.

The theory of social contract might appropriately portray the conception of authority of a seventeenth-or eighteenth-century gentleman, accustomed to the dealings of the marketplace, but it would not do as a characterization of the first establishment of a polity. The contention is that one cannot, without lapsing into absurdity, suppose the resolution of a *bellum omnium contra omnes* simply by a contract of rational,

¹⁰ S. N. 119.¹¹ S. N. 119.¹² S. N. 873. My italics.

self-interested men. The absurdity in question here is conceptual; and its force is such that Vico feels obliged to offer fresh interpretations of conventional conceptions of the roles of Solon and Lycurgus in the early history of Athens and Sparta, to reconsider the sort of wisdom which might be attributed to poets of primitive times, and, in short, to examine received historical interpretations in terms of the societies and practices from which they supposedly issued. But while the *Scienza nuova* would offer a methodological canon for the eradication (and explanation) of these various anachronisms, Vico's first awareness of the problem derived from his practical acquaintance with the contradictory attributes of the imaginary figures who were the *dramatis personae* of the most ancient history. And the key to its solution was his recognition that by "entering into" the imaginations of the first men, whose conduct popular traditions of the foundation of nations purported to describe, he would discover the original meanings which myths had for agents beneath the fabulous paradoxes resulting from the attempts of successive generations to interpret the stories of their predecessors in terms of their own assumptions. "To consider the way in which this first human thinking arose in the gentile world, we encountered exasperating difficulties which have cost us the research of a good twenty years. We had to descend from these human and refined natures of ours to those quite wild and savage natures, which we cannot at all imagine and can comprehend only with great effort."¹³

Such was the enterprise which occupied Vico in the whole of Book II of the *Scienza nuova seconda*, interpreting the genesis of the greater and lesser gentile gods in terms of the political and social relations between contending groups which these signified and the range of other meanings which this mythology might originally have conveyed:¹⁴ ". . . the fact that the first gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters" was "the master key of this Science."¹⁵ Fables were "ideal truths suited to the merit of those of whom the vulgar tell them; . . ."¹⁶ And "the first men, the

¹³ S. N. 338.

¹⁴ Book II, "Poetic Wisdom," S. N. 361-779.

¹⁵ S. N. 34. It is clear from Vico's use of the phrase "demonstrated necessity of nature" that he supposes himself able to attain a degree of objectivity that students of hermeneutics have often deemed impossible. The "necessity" in question turns on the range of meanings which can be attributed to the pronouncements and practices of peoples of particular dispositions. As the "nature" of man changes historically, so the interpretation of his artifacts must be regulated accordingly. In other words, Vico is claiming that a conceptual relationship exists between agents and their artifacts which enables certain interpretations to be dismissed for logical (and not empirical) reasons. For a further discussion of these and cognate matters see B. A. Haddock, "Vico and the Problem of Historical Reconstruction," *Social Research*, 43 (1976), 512-19.

¹⁶ S. N. 205.

children, as it were, of the human race, not being able to form intelligible class concepts of things, had a natural need to create poetic characters; . . .”¹⁷ Thus “these divine or heroic characters were true fables or myths, and their allegories are found to contain meanings not analogical but univocal, not philosophical but historical, of the peoples of Greece of those times.”¹⁸ This conception of “poetic wisdom” as a means of reconstructing original meanings was presupposed in the “discovery of the true Homer,” and the latter is best regarded as an appendix to the theses advanced in the former. When Vico turned from myth and fable in general to Homer in particular, he had in mind not only certain principles of interpretation of which his view of Homer was said to be a corollary, but also a substantive conception of primitive man which informed those principles.

It must be borne in mind that Vico’s Homeric studies were always subsidiary to the elaboration of the principles of interpretation which had “cost” him “the persistent research of almost all” his “literary life.”¹⁹ In the section *De constantia philologiae* of *Il diritto universale* he had included a chapter, *Nova scientia tentatur*, “wherein he begins to reduce philology to scientific principles.”²⁰ And a year later, in his *Notae in duos libros* of 1722, he “read both the poems of Homer in the light of his principles of philology; and by certain canons of mythology which he had conceived, he gives these poems an aspect different from that which they have hitherto borne, and shows how divinely the poet weaves into the treatment of his two subjects two groups of Greek stories, the one belonging to the obscure period and the other to the heroic, according to Varro’s division.”²¹ In the *Scienza nuova prima* he used his “seven principles of the obscurity of the fables” to distinguish layers of meaning in Homer which a simple concentration on textual exegesis would have foreclosed.²²

Three ages of heroic poets are discovered to have existed before Homer, and “with the provision of this knowledge one can restore the fables to their truth.”²³ The first was an age of “severe poets, which befits the founders of nations.”²⁴ Here there was not embellishment, but the unadorned narration of history in the poetic form characteristic of the epoch. In the second age, “corrupt poets,” in accordance with

¹⁷ S. N. 209.

¹⁸ S. N. 34.

¹⁹ S. N. 34.

²⁰ *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, 158; *Opere*, 52. The chapter, “*Nova scientia tentatur*,” is in Vico, *Opere giuridiche*, ed. P. Cristofolini (Florence, 1974), 386-401, with Italian and Latin versions on facing pages.

²¹ *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, 159-60; *Opere*, 54. The *Notae in duos libros* is in *Opere giuridiche*, 732-821.

²² Vico, *Opere filosofiche*, ed. Cristofolini (Florence, 1971), 263. See especially *ibid.*, 263-75, for Vico’s elaboration of these “principles” and their implications with regard to Homer.

²³ *Ibid.*, 270.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

their dissolute customs, altered the meanings of the original fables to conform with their own practices.²⁵ The poetry of the first two ages was not the product of individuals, but "of entire poetic nations."²⁶ It was only in the third age that "particular poets" appeared "who collected the fables from these nations, or rather their corrupted histories, and composed their poems about them."²⁷ Since Homer is assigned to the third age, he becomes, in the view of this criticism, "the first historian whom we have of the Greek nation."²⁸ He had compiled the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* from cognate stories derived from popular traditions; and contradictions in the modes of life portrayed in these groups of stories could be explained by the different regions or periods of heroic Greece from which they had issued. But the "discovery of the true Homer" only became an interpretive paradigm in the *Scienza nuova seconda*; and to that discovery I turn as my principal text.

Vico's principal concern was to develop a methodology which would enable historians to reconstruct *res gestae* of cultures remote from themselves without recourse to their own assumptions. The foundation of his positive recommendations was an analysis of the theoretical shortcomings of the historical practice of his contemporaries. His contention here was that without a self-conscious and articulated theory of interpretation, historians were liable (by default) to read into the pronouncements of other places and peoples the modes of thought, rules, and conventions which gave these sorts of utterances meanings within their own world of ideas. "Because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance man makes himself the measure of all things."²⁹ And, further, "whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand."³⁰ The corollary of this tendency to interpret the evidence of other cultures by a species of analogical extension from one's own experience "points to the inexhaustible source of all the errors about the principles of humanity that have been adopted by entire nations and by all the scholars. For when the former began to take notice of them and the latter to investigate them, it was on the basis of their own enlightened, cultivated, and magnificent times that they judged the origins of humanity, which must nevertheless by the nature of things have been small, crude, and quite obscure."³¹

With regard to Homer, these "conceits" of nations and scholars, each nation claiming "that it before all other nations invented the comforts of human life and that its remembered history goes back to the very beginning of the world"³² and the latter "that what they know is as old

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹ S. N. 120.

³¹ S. N. 123.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁰ S. N. 122.

³² S. N. 125.

as the world,"³³ led to the attribution to Homer of qualities that are conceptually incompatible. Thus philosophers, from their own perspective, accepted "the opinion that Homer was endowed with sublime esoteric wisdom."³⁴ But Homer's stories present Minerva despoiling Venus and striking Mars with a rock, Ulysses poisoning his arrows, "enemies slain in battle" left "as a prey to dogs and vultures," Mars calling Minerva a "dog-fly," and his heroes "delighting so much in wine" that "whenever they are troubled in spirit" they find "all their comfort . . . in getting drunk."³⁵ These, Vico claims, are not the precepts of a philosopher; and whatever virtue they may have as a means of communicating with "the wild and savage vulgar," they are "certainly not characteristic of a mind chastened and civilized by any sort of philosophy."³⁶ Nor could the rich comparisons which "make up all the sublimity of the *Iliad* in particular, have originated in a mind touched and humanized by any philosophy."³⁷ For "the constancy . . . which is developed and fixed by the study of the wisdom of the philosophers, could not have depicted gods and heroes of such instability."³⁸ All this, for Vico, is an instance of anachronism, the interpretation of the utterances of the "age of heroes" in terms of the assumptions of the "age of men."

However, the "conceit of nations" contributed its share of confusion with regard to the identification of the historical Homer. "Almost all the cities of Greece claimed to be his birthplace and there were not lacking those who asserted that he was an Italian Greek."³⁹ Nor is it possible, from an examination of the two poems, to ascertain precisely the age to which Homer belongs because it is difficult "to reconcile so many refined customs (as portrayed in the *Odyssey*) with the many wild and savage ones which he attributes to his heroes at the same time, and particularly in the *Iliad*."⁴⁰ In short, without a theory of interpretation it is impossible to evaluate the competing claims of philosophers delighting in reading their maxims between Homer's inimitable lines or of popular traditions which flatter themselves on the basis of a mythology masquerading as history; and it is impossible to reconcile either sets of claims with Homer's texts as they have come down to us.

Vico's solution to this interpretative dilemma was to effect a *rapprochement* between philosophy and philology, such that the two disciplines could offer each other mutual support in their respective endeavors. Previously philosophy had concerned itself with abstract and universal truths which were held to be valid (and intelligible) without recourse to a consideration of the historical situation from which they had

³³ S. N. 127.

³⁵ S. N. 781, 782, 784.

³⁶ S. N. 785.

³⁸ S. N. 786.

⁴⁰ S. N. 804.

³⁴ S. N. 780.

³⁷ S. N. 785.

³⁹ S. N. 788.

issued; while philology, concerned only with the proper designation of artifacts, had been pursued in disregard of the theoretical questions which might be raised in this activity of identification and classification. "Philosophy contemplates reason, whence comes knowledge of the true; philology observes that of which human choice is author, whence comes consciousness of the certain."⁴¹ Vico's point was that neither philosophy nor philology could adequately fulfill the tasks they had traditionally been assigned unless they entered into some (ill-defined) reciprocal relation. ". . . the philosophers" had "failed by half in not giving certainty to their reasonings by appeal to the authority of the philologists, and likewise . . . the latter failed by half in not taking care to give their authority the sanction of truth by appeal to the reasoning of the philosophers."⁴²

How exactly this complementary role of philosophy and philology in the corroboration of historical accounts is to be interpreted is among the most contentious issues in Vichian scholarship.⁴³ But that the relation in question is central to the structure of the *Scienza nuova* is confirmed by Vico when he notes that success in this undertaking "would have anticipated us in conceiving this Science."⁴⁴ By its means "the great fragments of antiquity, hitherto useless to science because they lay begrimed, broken, and scattered, shed great light when cleaned, pieced together, and restored."⁴⁵ The traditional view of Homer, for instance, as a poet rich in esoteric wisdom, effectively deprived historians of a document which might enable them to reconstruct the practices of primitive peoples, just as the diffusionist theory of cultural development which was presupposed in the received interpretation of the Law of the Twelve Tables precluded any attempt to understand the palingenesis of practices from barbarism to civility. In the light of Vico's criticism, these texts took their place as evidence for the reconstruction of attitudes of mind remote from ourselves; and Homer's "poems should henceforth be highly prized

⁴¹ S. N. 138.

⁴² S. N. 140.

⁴³ Croce, for instance, has interpreted Vico's synthesis of philosophy and philology as a premonition of Hegel's "concrete universal." See Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, 238. While more recently Leon Pompa, *Vico: A Study of the "New Science"* (Cambridge, 1975), 128-53, has argued that Vico is making a claim for the complementary role of theory and confirmation in historical explanation. Pompa's view of Vico is distorted by his concentration on the "Elements" of the *Scienza nuova*, reading these as a theory which is subsequently confirmed by the theses advanced in Books II and III. In the *Scienza nuova prima* the "Elements" were accorded no such independent epistemological status, and an acceptance of Pompa's argument involves an assertion of a more fundamental distinction between the editions of 1725 and 1744 than seems warranted. On Pompa's approach see the important review by Hayden V. White in *History and Theory*, 15 (1976), 186-202. See also B. A. Haddock, "Vico and Anachronism," *Political Studies*, 24 (1976), 483-87.

⁴⁴ S. N. 140.

⁴⁵ S. N. 357.

as being two great treasure stores of the customs of early Greece."⁴⁶ But such is the case only after philosophy and philology, in conjunction, have done their work, restoring an artifact to the guise it assumed on the occasion of its birth. And my concern is to show how, from "all the things in the speeches and in the narrative which are improprieties and improbabilities in the Homer hitherto believed in," Vico is able to achieve this feat of reconstruction.⁴⁷

The interpretive difficulties in the case of Homer, however, are exacerbated by the fact that the poems were the products of a pre-literate culture, and hence the normal canons of philological criticism of post-Renaissance Europe could not facilitate a reconstruction of their original contextual character. ". . . since there has come down to us no writer more ancient than Homer, . . . and since the writers came long after him, we are obliged to apply our metaphysical criticism, treating him as a founder of a nation, as he has been held to be of Greece, and to discover the truth, both as to his age and as to his fatherland, from Homer himself."⁴⁸ This "metaphysical art of criticism" was "a history of human ideas," proceeding "by a severe analysis of human thoughts about the human necessities or utilities of social life."⁴⁹ And because "doctrines must take their beginning from that of the matters of which they treat,"⁵⁰ it had to begin "when the first men began to think humanly, and not when the philosophers began to reflect on human ideas. . . ."⁵¹

The criterion it employed was "the common sense of the human race, determined by the necessary harmony of human institutions"⁵² which is "judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation, or the entire human race."⁵³ In other words, the range of meanings that can (in principle) be attributed to an utterance is to be regulated by the *Zusammenhang* of the ideas and institutions characteristic of the period in which it was uttered. And where the ideas, institutions, and practices of any one period fail to correspond in an historical account, it can be presumed, *prima facie*, that the evidence has been misinterpreted in the light of one of the anachronistic "conceits." But the "metaphysical criticism" offers, in addition, a sketch of the genesis of ideas in terms of the modes of thought prevalent among "the founders of the gentile nations."⁵⁴ The first men, who "were all robust sense and vigorous imagination," employed "a metaphysics not rational and abstract like that of learned men now, but felt and imagined. . . ."⁵⁵ Their "minds were not in the least abstract, refined, or spiritualized, because they were entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, buried in the body."⁵⁶ The categories which constituted their *Weltan-*

⁴⁶ S. N. 904.

⁴⁸ S. N. 788.

⁵¹ S. N. 347.

⁵⁴ S. N. 839.

⁴⁹ S. N. 348, 347.

⁵² S. N. 348.

⁵⁵ S. N. 375.

⁴⁷ S. N. 874.

⁵⁰ S. N. 314.

⁵³ S. N. 142.

⁵⁶ S. N. 378.

schauung were imaginative projections of the world of sense-experience which was the limit of their conceptual range. Hence "the first gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters."⁵⁷ And since that was the world to which Homer belonged (whether considered as an individual or an "ideal-type"), it followed that a paradigm of "poetic wisdom" (of the sort that Vico elaborates at length in Book II of the *Scienza nuova*) could serve as a regulative canon to delimit the range of meanings which could be attributed to his texts.⁵⁸

Vico's procedure, then, was to follow his catalogue of the incongruous conceptions of Homer which had hitherto prevailed, including both the internal inconsistencies in the ideas attributed to Homer and the contradictory historical details concerning the poet's fatherland and the period in which he was alleged to have composed his poems, with a series of philosophical and philological "proofs" which together fashion a coherent account out of the evidence that had previously been a source of incredulity for the critical historian.⁵⁹ The "philosophical proofs" delineate the modes of thought which can (in principle) be expected in a poet with a "matchless faculty for heroic poetry."⁶⁰ Thus the character of the oral poetic tradition to which the Homeric poems appear to have belonged is in agreement with the axiom that "men are naturally led to preserve the memories of the institutions and laws that bind them within their societies."⁶¹ The historical details which are the constituents of the poems are explained by "the truth . . . that history must have come first and then poetry, for history is a simple statement of the true but poetry is an imitation besides."⁶² And the poetic character which Homer's history takes is in turn explained by "the fact that the first gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters,"⁶³ and hence "the first history must have been poetic."⁶⁴ Being primitive artifacts, knowing neither the simulation nor dissimulation which are the products of our "magnificent" times, "the fables in their origin" can be accounted "true and severe narrations;" and difficulties of interpreting these meanings are explicable "because they were originally for the most part gross, they gradually lost their original meanings, were then altered, subsequently became improbable, after that obscure, then scandalous, and finally incredible."⁶⁵ Again, the *dramatis*

⁵⁷ S. N. 34.

⁵⁸ On paradigms and interpretation in Vico see B. A. Haddock, "Vico: The Problem of Interpretation," *Social Research*, 43 (1976), 535-52.

⁵⁹ S. N. 810-872.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Book III, ch. IV, 308; *Opere*, 738.

⁶¹ S. N. 811, 201.

⁶² S. N. 812.

⁶³ S. N. 34.

⁶⁴ S. N. 813.

⁶⁵ S. N. 814. At S. N. 815 Vico says that the fables "were received by Homer in this corrupt and distorted form." This, properly speaking, should belong among the "philological proofs," as indeed should the last part of S. N. 814 quoted above.

personae of the poems, who, considered as ancient sages, appeared incredible in their folly and barbarism, are intelligible as symbols of heroic virtue. Their mode of presentation was "born of the need of a nature incapable of abstracting forms and properties from subjects."⁶⁶ Since they were the product of a "barbarism, which for lack of reflection does not know how to feign," their poetic allegories "must necessarily contain historical significations referring only to the earliest times of Greece."⁶⁷ The poems were fitted to a people whose mode of thought was "almost all body and almost no reflection," dominated by "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."⁶⁸ This mode of thought was natural in a period when "the poetic faculty" submerges "the whole mind in the senses," in contradistinction from the rationality of metaphysics which "abstracts the mind from the senses;" the former plunges "deep into particulars" while the latter "soars up to universals."⁶⁹ All that makes Homer "the father and prince of all sublime poets," his "poetic comparisons taken from wild and savage things" which "are certainly incomparable," is a guarantee that his "sentences, comparisons, and descriptions could not have been the natural product of a calm, cultivated, and gentle philosopher."⁷⁰ For the character of "heroic language" itself, consisting of "similes, images, and comparisons," was "born of the lack of genera and species, which are necessary for the proper definition of things, and hence born of a necessity of nature common to entire peoples."⁷¹

These "philosophical proofs," then, serve to delineate the conceptual range of the phases through which the thought-structures of both individuals and societies must pass, and thereby to establish the limits of possible meanings which can be construed from the utterances of any given phase. They function as a theoretical paradigm to rule out the suggestion that (say) the *Critique of Practical Reason* could have been produced in a society which was unable to distinguish moral rules from social practices, or that society owed its first establishment to a rational agreement of self-interested men, or that a distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments could be attributed to men who saw nature as "a vast animate body which feels passions and effects."⁷² But without

The more appropriate axiom for the matter at hand might be S. N. 121. A number of the "philosophical proofs" advanced in this section have a dubious epistemological status and stand as a warning against any attempt to make Vico appear thoroughly systematic. See Ernan McMullin, "Vico's Theory of Science," *Social Research*, 43 (1976), 450-80.

⁶⁶ S. N. 816.

⁶⁸ S. N. 819.

⁷⁰ S. N. 823, 826, 828.

⁷² S. N. 377.

⁶⁷ S. N. 817, 818.

⁶⁹ S. N. 821.

⁷¹ S. N. 832.

the assistance of philology they are unable to say what was actually the case, only what could possibly be the case.

The epistemological character of the "philological proofs" is more straightforward. In themselves they constitute a motley assemblage of documentary and literary evidence which confirms that the phase of development of modes of thought to which Homer should be assigned is indeed that designated by Vico as "poetic wisdom." Thus the character of the Homeric poems as history is supported by the fact that "all ancient profane histories have fabulous beginnings."⁷³ And the verse-form of these histories is confirmed because "barbarous peoples . . . have been found to preserve in verses the beginnings of their history."⁷⁴ The fact that the testimonies of ancient peoples (such as is found in Egyptian hieroglyphics, the Law of the Twelve Tables, and the Homeric poems) have come down to us as repositories of esoteric wisdom is explained by the "conceit of scholars, who will have it that what they know is as old as the world;"⁷⁵ but that this has in fact occurred in the reception of the fables through the ages is confirmed by the evidence of Manetho and the Greek philosophers, "and the naturalness and ease, free of violence, subterfuge, or distortion," with which Vico was able "to restore to the fables their original historical meanings," is proof "that the historical allegories which they contained were proper to them."⁷⁶

Again, the presumption that early histories are poetic in form "strongly confirms the assertion of Strabo, in a golden passage, that before Herodotus, or rather before Hecataeus of Miletus, the history of the peoples of Greece was all written by their poets."⁷⁷ And the "passages in the *Odyssey* in which it is said, in praise of a speaker who has told a story well, that he has told it like a musician or singer," is exactly what one would expect of pre-literate, folk-poetry which was transmitted by "the Homeric rhapsodes, who were vulgar men, each preserving by memory some part of the Homeric poems."⁷⁸ The historical details which are known of these rhapsodes, who "went about the cities of Greece singing the books of Homer at the fairs and festivals," reinforce the view that the wisdom the poems contained was not that of great and rare philosophers but belonged to "a necessity of nature common to entire peoples."⁷⁹ The etymology of their name, which was "stitchers-together of songs," suggests that "these songs they must certainly have collected

⁷³ S. N. 840.

⁷⁴ S. N. 841. Note, in this connection, S. N. 470. ". . . if the peoples were established by laws, and if among all these peoples the laws were given in verse, and if the first institutions of these peoples were likewise preserved in verse, it necessarily follows that all the first peoples were poets."

⁷⁵ S. N. 127.

⁷⁶ S. N. 846. See also S. N. 844, 845.

⁷⁷ S. N. 847.

⁷⁸ S. N. 849.

⁷⁹ S. N. 851, 832.

from none other than their own peoples.”⁸⁰ The discrepancies between the materials and styles of the stories collected in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is explained because “the Pisistratids, tyrants of Athens, divided and arranged the poems of Homer, or had them divided and arranged.”⁸¹ And this first editorial labor is evidence of the antiquity of the Homeric poems compared with (say) Hesiod, Herodotus, or Hippocrates whose works were composed in writing rather than collected from oral traditions.⁸² The quasi-mythical quality of the attributes of “the founders of the gentile nations, among whom we must number Homer,”⁸³ accounted for the confused and contradictory claims made with regard to historical details such as Homer’s fatherland, his native city, and even his age.⁸⁴ But this tissue of contradictions, read in the context of the “metaphysical criticism” advanced in the “philosophical proofs,” assumed a coherent place in the conception of things characteristic of “Poetic Wisdom,” where great deeds which marked a transition in the history of cultures (such as the first establishment of agriculture) are attributed to individuals (such as Hercules) and no clear distinction is drawn between deed, symbol, and thing signified.

The discordance revealed in the various pieces of evidence pertaining to Homer, then, considered in isolation and without the benefit of an interpretative theory, “become proper and necessary in the Homer herein discovered” because the air of paradox which surrounded them is removed once they are placed in the context of a philosophical theory that sketches the conceptual lineaments of the society to which they refer.⁸⁵ Thus “the reason why the Greek peoples so vied with each other for the honor of being his fatherland, and why almost all claimed him as citizen, is that the Greek peoples were themselves Homer.”⁸⁶ And “the reason why opinions as to his age vary so much is that our Homer truly lived on the lips and in the memories of the peoples of Greece throughout the whole period from the Trojan War down to the time of Numa, a span of 460 years.”⁸⁷ The stories of “the blindness and the poverty of Homer” were references to “characteristics of the rhapsodes” who preserved the traditions of early Greece in their travels from city to city “singing the poems of Homer” and who “were the authors of these poems inasmuch as they were a part of these peoples who had composed their histories in the poems.”⁸⁸

The divergences between the manners and customs portrayed in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are explained because “Homer composed the *Iliad* in his youth, that is, when Greece was young and consequently seething

⁸⁰ S. N. 852.

⁸² See S. N. 855-60.

⁸⁵ S. N. 874.

⁸⁸ S. N. 877, 878.

⁸¹ S. N. 853.

⁸³ S. N. 839.

⁸⁴ S. N. 861-68.

⁸⁶ S. N. 875.

⁸⁷ S. N. 876.

with sublime passions, such as pride, wrath, and lust for vengeance;" while the *Odyssey* was the product of his old age, "when the spirits of Greece had been somewhat cooled by reflection, which is the mother of prudence. . . ."89 Thus, not only is the paradox clarified that Dionysius Longinus should maintain (despite the fact that the historical details of Homer's life are lacking) that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were respectively the product of his youth and old age; but the geographical allusions which marked the poems as the product of different regions are explained as a consequence of the different sources from which the rhapsodes had drawn their stories.⁹⁰ And the lack of polish and contradiction which critics had espied in the mode of discourse is justified in this Homer, "lost in the crowd of the Greek peoples," whose sublimity was a corollary of his never having been subjected to an aesthetic rationalism that would have modulated his "wild and savage comparisons" and introduced a false decorum "in his cruel and fearful descriptions of battles and deaths."⁹¹ All the incongruous attributes of his characters, "his having made men of gods and gods of men," assume their place as "properties of the heroic age of the Greeks, in which and throughout which Homer was an incomparable poet, just because, in the age of vigorous memory, robust imagination, and sublime invention, he was in no sense a philosopher."⁹²

It remains to consider, in the light of Vico's "discovery," what sort of theoretical relationship he supposes obtains between philosophy and philology; how, in fact, philosophers can give "certainty to their reasonings by appeal to the authority of the philologists" and philologists can "give their authority the sanction of truth by appeal to the reasoning of the philosophers."⁹³ Philology, for Vico, is an umbrella term referring to the study of "the history of words and the history of things" which includes "all the grammarians, historians, critics, who have occupied themselves with the study of the languages and deeds of peoples."⁹⁴ Each of these engagements (whether their practitioners care to admit it or not) involves the interpretation and not simply the enumeration of *res gestae*. And though interpretative criteria might be mechanical (alphabetical order) or consequences of practical convenience (the limitations of floor space in a museum), the presentation of artifacts (as anybody who has concerned himself with the preparation of dictionaries, bibliographies, or exhibitions will acknowledge) is already to offer an intimation of interpretation in the sense that criteria of selection are invoked. Vico's point is that these diligent persons, bent on the "mere" reconstruction or restoration of antiquarian curiosities, are offering an implicit interpretative slant to matters that they intend only to describe. Even to designate an object as a relic of a certain sort is to relate that object to

⁸⁹ S. N. 879.

⁹⁰ See S. N. 881.

⁹¹ S. N. 882, 893, 894.

⁹² S. N. 889, 896.

⁹³ S. N. 140.

⁹⁴ *Opere giuridiche*, 386; S. N. 139.

a set of (more or less coherent) assumptions about other objects of that sort; and in this way the chaos of fragmentary evidence which faces an historian at the beginning of his enquiry is given a shape which enables him to reconstruct the purposes and presuppositions of the people who produced the artifacts in question. The general statements which serve as an interpretative canon for past human conduct, however, were normally simply an analogical extension of the historian's world of ideas; and the past was rendered in a language which made it an appendage of the present. None of this need have been a stumbling-block for historical reconstruction if human nature had been sufficiently similar across the ages for the presuppositions of the present to be automatically applicable to all peoples and periods; but the way men conceived their own condition, the categories they used to describe the things around them and the relations between them, changed in ways that Vico had sought to demonstrate in the *Scienza nuova*. Thus it was that the application of present ideas to past peoples assumed the character of "conceits."

Recognition that the transmutation of cultures was at the same time a transmutation of modes of thought was at once an analysis of the causes of erroneous historical accounts and an intimation of the sort of theoretical framework which would enable historians to avoid the cruder sorts of anachronism. While the aim is the interpretation of *res gestae*, the canon must be a theory of the genesis of modes of thought; for it is only by matching the artifact with its presuppositions (difficult though this may be in the case of brutes incapable of ratiocination) that the historian is saved from the temptation of his own "conceits." The point is clear. Utterances do not make sense in isolation, like crystals of meaning complete unto themselves, but have to be set in the context of the network of assumptions from which they issued. And the appropriate historical response to a puzzling utterance is not to treat it as a suitable case for analytical dissection, but simply to try to reconstruct the attitude of mind which might make an utterance of that sort intelligible.⁹⁵

Nor is there any limit (in principle) to the range of application of Vico's method. His conception of the ages of gods, heroes, and men, each having its own language, customs, jurisprudence, mode of government, conception of authority, and (above all) notion of rationality, furnished him with a set of criteria to distinguish the compass of meanings for the utterances of any one period. Each of the practices of an age was related conceptually to the other pursuits which gave the period a specific character. Thus the intellectual poverty of the first men in the age of gods led them to believe "themselves and all their institutions to depend on the gods, since they thought everything was a god or was

⁹⁵ There is a brief account of the matters discussed in this paragraph in B. A. Haddock, "Vico and the Problem of Historical Reconstruction," *Social Research*, 43 (1976), 512-19.

made or done by a god."⁹⁶ And the corollary was a theocratic system of government in which decisions were made by recourse to oracles. The age of heroes (which Homer had portrayed), with its "choleric and punctilious" customs, was a period of aristocratic governments based on force and a "reason of state" which was "not naturally known to all men but only to the few experts in government who are able to discern what is necessary for the preservation of mankind."⁹⁷ While the age of men, which was based on "fully developed human reason," recognized the "equality of the intelligent nature which is the proper nature of man."⁹⁸

These historical paradigms, and the necessary succession of their development, enabled Vico to dismiss certain theses (such as Bodin's claim that civil constitutions developed from monarchy, through tyranny, to popular republics, and finally to aristocracy) as (in principle) absurd.⁹⁹ But it was the artifacts of ancient Greece and Rome that occupied him primarily in the *Scienza nuova*; and, in particular, the detailed elaboration of the notion of "Poetic Wisdom" (as it embraces the ages of gods and heroes) which allowed him to set those artifacts in a proper historical perspective. There is, however, an intimation in the *Scienza nuova* of the broader scope which Vico supposed was open to his theories. Not only does he speak of "the recourse of human institutions which the nations take when they rise again," but, more specifically, he claims that the "second barbarism" of feudal Europe ("which has remained darker than that of the first") can be illuminated by a comparative analysis drawing upon the substantive theses advanced concerning the heroic phase of ancient Greek and Roman culture.¹⁰⁰ In this way, Dante is called "the Tuscan Homer," singing "only of history" at the end of "the returned barbarism of Italy."¹⁰¹ And in a short essay, written between 1728 and 1730 and aptly entitled by Nicolini "Discovery of the true Dante," Vico extended to the consideration of Dante precisely the method he had employed so felicitously in his "discovery of the true Homer."¹⁰²

Dante's *Commedia* is said to be worthy of study in three particular respects; first, as a "history of the barbarian times of Italy;" secondly, as the "source of the most beautiful Tuscan dialect;" and thirdly, as an "example of sublime poetry."¹⁰³ Just because poetry was a natural rather than reflective product, early poetry is taken to consist of "true histories;"¹⁰⁴ and as Homer was the "first poet of the gentile nations," and Aeneas the "first historian of the Romans," so Dante was "the first or among the first of the Italian historians."¹⁰⁵ As a source of the Tuscan

⁹⁶ S. N. 922.

⁹⁸ S. N. 924, 927.

¹⁰⁰ S. N. 1046.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 950.

⁹⁷ S. N. 920, 949.

⁹⁹ See S. N. 1009-1019.

¹⁰² See *Opere*, 950-54.

¹⁰¹ S. N. 786.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

language, it had to be explained how Dante (like Homer before him) had incorporated in his poetry the various dialects he had encountered in his travels through Italy. But the fact of the matter was that the popular language of Florence in the *Trecento* had much in common with the language of the other Italian cities; and while it was Dante's fortune to live in "the golden age of that language," it was his genius to have distilled its quintessence in his poems.¹⁰⁶ While Homer became a symbol representing the various strands of oral traditions preserved by the rhapsodes in their songs, the scope of the sources from which Dante could have drawn his language was restricted because "the life of Dante would not be enough to learn the vernacular languages of so many peoples."¹⁰⁷ Both Homer and Dante, however, shared the character of sublime poets, writing in periods which admired magnanimous spirits "who did not care for anything but glory and immortality."¹⁰⁸ Each had the advantage of a mode of discourse which was foreclosed to the "false and frigid poets" of the age of men; for the fine distinctions of an elaborate language allowed "reflections on the passions" where previously there had been only a natural (and hence accurate) description of particular instances of human conduct.¹⁰⁹ Thus Dante "filled the scenes of his *Commedia* with real persons and portrayed real events in the lives of the dead" just as Homer had in the *Iliad*.¹¹⁰ And the emergence of the New Comedy, "born in times of the most lively reflection," is the mark of a later stage in the succession of cultural forms because it has succeeded in abstracting qualities from characters to present them as pure fictions.¹¹¹ This designation of the qualities of heroic poetry, at once sublime and historical, was only possible by recourse to the paradigm of "Poetic Wisdom" which supplied the conceptual lineaments of the peoples who sought to communicate by this means. Without such a canon, esoteric meanings could be read between innocent lines in the light of the assumptions which informed our conception of human nature. But the only meanings which poems of this sort could have ("by a demonstrated necessity of nature") were historical.¹¹²

My contention, then, is that the *Scienza nuova* is best regarded not as a theory of science (as that term would be understood today) but as a theory of interpretation; and that the nodal concepts of the *Scienza*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 951. There is some uncertainty about Vico's view of the relationship between Dante's language and the dialects spoken in the other Italian cities. In a letter to Gherardo degli Angioli of 26 December 1725, he says that "because of the poverty of the vernacular language, Dante, in order to expound his *Commedia*, had to collect a language from all the peoples of Italy, in the manner in which, because they came in similar times, Homer had collected his from all the Greeks." *Opere*, 124.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 951.

¹⁰⁹ S. N. 825.

¹¹¹ S. N. 817.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 952.

¹¹⁰ S. N. 817.

¹¹² S. N. 34.

nuova (here I have concentrated on the relations of philosophy and philology and the characterization of "Poetic Wisdom" as a key to unravel the thinking of the first men) are misconstrued if they are read in the light of the inductive, deductive, or hypothetico-deductive models of explanation which have formed the frame of reference for debate about the character of the natural and social sciences. And I am encouraged in this view by the form which Vico's theories were given in their application to specific historical problems; his concern seems not to have been the elaboration of "a hypothetical, predictive theory about the conditions under which institutions will develop in certain ways," but the reconstruction of the original character which ideas, practices, and institutions assumed for agents.¹¹³ Starting from the premise that our interpretation of the past will "naturally" be influenced by the changed circumstances and assumptions from which we regard it, he has sought a method that will at once account for the distortion which is a consequence of the elapse of time and (in the light of this awareness) offer a model of interpretation which adopts critical criteria that are presupposed if not articulated by the peoples whose practices he is concerned to reconstruct. My attention in this paper has been given to Vico's reconstruction of Homer as an illustration of his theories, but the range of such case-studies could be expanded profitably. His various theses advanced concerning the laws and institutions of Rome have often been noticed in this connection; but his tantalizing suggestions on (for example) the feudal origins of the first commonwealths, the *Zusammenhang* of heroic sentences, descriptions, and customs, and the interpretation of pre-literate artifacts by means of a mythological canon, have received insufficient attention from scholars whose concern has been the designation of the principles which informed these exercises in historical reconstruction.

The perspective I recommend has the merit of placing Vico's work in the context of three of the great intellectual currents which nurtured his thought: the Renaissance philological tradition, the sixteenth-century revolution in jurisprudence, and the *querelle des anciens et modernes*.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Leon Pompa, *Vico: A Study of the "New Science"*, 103. I am sustained in the burden of my interpretation by the closing remarks of Hayden V. White's review of Pompa in *History and Theory*, 15 (1976), 198-202.

¹¹⁴ The full import of the sixteenth-century jurisprudential background to Vico's thought has attracted attention only recently. See Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London, 1976), 123-42; Donald R. Kelley, "Vico's Road: From Philology to Jurisprudence and Back," in *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Donald P. Verene (Baltimore, 1976), 15-29; *idem*, "In Vico Veritas: The True Philosophy and the New Science," *Social Research*, 43 (1976), 601-11; and Donald R. Kelley, "Vera Philosophia: The Philosophical Significance of Renaissance Jurisprudence," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 14 (1976), 267-79.

These movements were concerned with the sorts of criteria which a critic might invoke in the emendation or interpretation of a text, and the range of application of the wisdom of ancient texts to peoples in very different circumstances. The issues which were raised in these debates were central to the problems which occupied Vico in the years after 1711 when he was painfully revising and extending the scope of his theory of knowledge. The leading issues in the methodology of the natural sciences had not concerned him in this direct way; the advances made by Newton and Leibniz in calculus (and even the importance of Descartes' work for the experimental sciences) passed him by. His conception of natural science was strictly circumscribed by Baconian presuppositions which (by the end of the seventeenth century) had become commonplaces. The attempt to claim him as a radical innovator in this sphere, fashioning a science of the human studies out of the assumptions which had transformed the natural sciences, is surely misplaced.

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