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Dustin Peone

Godfrey's Role in Vico's *Scienza nuova*

Imaginative Universals

Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) was the first European philosopher to take seriously the archaic myths of the earliest peoples and the poems of the first poets. The second and third books of his *Scienza nuova* (1730/1744)—"Poetic Wisdom" and "The Discovery of the True Homer"—are the result of Vico's investigation into the manner of thinking of the first human beings, which he calls "the research of a good twenty years."[1] In the first of these books, Vico outlines a poetic wisdom that is different in kind from what we take to be wisdom in our age. Vico's earliest poets were crude and unsophisticated, bound to bodily sense, and unable to think in abstractions. He writes that "the first wisdom of the gentile world must have begun with a metaphysics not rational and abstract like that of learned men now, but felt and imagined as that of these first men must have been, who, without power of ratiocination, were all robust sense and vigorous imagination" (NS, §375). This metaphysics was "born of their ignorance of causes, for ignorance, the mother of wonder, made everything wonderful to men who were ignorant of everything" (§375).

On the Vichian view, all nations follow a common *storia ideale eterna* (ideal eternal history) (NS, §§240–45). Vico summarizes this ideal history in one sentence: "Men first feel necessity, then look for utility, next attend to comfort, still later amuse themselves with pleasure,

1. Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1988), §338. The Italian original is in *Opere*, ed. Arnoldo Mondadori, 2 vols. (Milan: Meridiani, 1990), 1:411–971. Paragraph numbers are the same in the Italian and English editions. Hereafter cited parenthetically as NS.

thence grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad and waste their substance" (§241). Nations pass through three distinct ages: an age of gods, an age of heroes, and an age of men. The first two ages, those of gods and heroes, are typified by the poetic mode of thinking.

Poetic wisdom is tied to a robust *fantasia* (imagination). Thinking revolves around certain fixed points, which Vico calls *universali fantastici*, "imaginative universals" or "poetic characters" (NS, §34, §§204–10, §§933–34).[2] Vico says that the discovery of these imaginative universals is "the master key" of the *Scienza nuova* and the result of the entirety of his literary labors. He writes, "The poetic characters of which we speak were certain imaginative genera (images for the most part of animate substances, of gods or heroes, formed by their imagination) to which they reduced all the species or all the particulars appertaining to each genus" (§34). These heroic characters embody "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" (§34). The persons of the first and second ages, with their crude and fantastic minds, required these universals for orientation to the world. Vico says, "The first men, the 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; that is, imaginative class concepts or universals, to which, as to certain modes or ideal portraits, to reduce all the particular species which resembled them. Because of the resemblance, the ancient fables could not but be created appropriately" (§209). All early myths, for Vico, are simply true.

Jove was the first imaginative universal and therefore the earliest god (NS, §§377–79, §502). Vico tells us that "every gentile nation had its Jove" (§193). Thunder is an astrological phenomenon known to all parts of the world, and fear of thunder is a universal psychological response. For Vico, this fear was the primordial event that preceded the formation of societies and the advent of human thought. Prior to the experience of thunder, there were no fixed points of reference to orient thinking. The early pre-civil human beings wandered about the earth, bestial and solitary. Vico writes that the "first founders of gentile humanity" appeared only "when at last the sky fearfully rolled with thunder and flashed with lightning" (§377). This event caused fear and astonishment, and these early men "raised their eyes and became aware of the sky" (§377). Humans had forever lived beneath the sky but only became aware of it

2. On Vico's use of imaginative universals, see Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981), chap. 3.

when it spoke to them. Because the unfamiliar is always interpreted by the familiar, these men "pictured the sky to themselves as a great animated body, which in that aspect they called Jove, the first god of the so-called greater gentes, who meant to tell them something by the hiss of his bolts and the clap of his thunder" (§377).

Jove became the first absolute reference point for human consciousness, the *arche* of civil society. When human beings were first able to recognize the sky, this allowed them to distinguish it from the earth and the sea, which they named Cybele and Neptune (NS, §402). Each god embodied a different aspect of the physical world, and the naming of each of these gods fixed a particular idea in the mind of the earliest people. Vico writes that these mythical figures "must have a univocal signification connoting a quality common to all their species and individuals" (§403). The discovery of these imaginative universals was the necessary preliminary for having a world at all. The chaotic flux of particulars can be tamed only when humans begin to recognize likenesses and patterns and see that the sky is not new every moment but that it is always the one Jove, whatever his different moods.

Apart from the gods, the great heroic figures are also imaginative universals. They serve to orient the thinking of humans in terms not of cosmic but of moral phenomena. The heroic figures are fixed exemplars of types of behavior. Most of the poetic characters whom Vico names are from the Homeric epics and the received mythos of early Greece and Italy. Hercules is the poetic universal for all slayers of monsters.[3] All valiant fighters are Achilles, and all clever men are Ulysses (NS, §403, §934). These heroes are archetypes, credited with all achievements of a certain type. Any individual who performs a deed fitting this type literally *becomes* the hero in that moment. This is not to be understood as an analogy but as an identity. The poetic universal is more real than any individual and the source of reality for the individual. Benedetto Croce considers the doctrine of imaginative universals an irredeemable error on Vico's part, insisting that the imaginative particular can only be joined to a rational universal concept. He writes that the true and proper universal must be "rational rather than imaginative [*ragionato e non fantastico*]."[4] What Croce fails to understand is that Vico's doctrine is not a theory of rational concepts but one of images, not one of Aristotelian class logic but of poetic logic. Ernst Cassirer presents a similar notion in his analysis of

3. Giambattista Vico, *The First New Science*, ed. and trans. Leon Pompa (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), §262. This is the first edition of the *Scienza nuova* (1725), very little of which appeared in the later editions.

4. Benedetto Croce, *La filosofia di G. B. Vico* (Bari: Laterza, 1965), 59–61.

mythical consciousness. Cassirer tells us that when, in archaic societies, the shaman puts on the mask and portrays the god in the ritual, he literally becomes the god: "It is no mere play that the dancer in the mythical drama is enacting; the dancer *is* the god, he *becomes* the god."[5]

Vico writes, "The peoples of Greece attached all the various particulars belonging to each genus" to the poetic universals: "To Achilles, for example, who is the subject of the *Iliad*, they attached all the properties of heroic valor, and all the feelings and customs arising from these natural properties." To Ulysses, "they attached all the feelings and customs of heroic wisdom" (NS, §809). These properties then came to be understood only in terms of their archetypes. All wise men became Ulysses, all valorous men Achilles. Vico then lays down the following as an "eternal property of poetry": "Peoples who have first created heroic characters for themselves will afterwards apprehend human customs only in terms of characters made famous by luminous examples" (§809). Having the universal of a Hercules, the Greeks attribute all glorious deeds to this one figure: "When many others, at many different times, are subsequently seen performing deeds with this same character, the nation will certainly name them after the man first named from it. So, keeping to the same example, each will subsequently acquire the name 'Hercules.'"[6]

I wish in this paper to focus on one imaginative universal in particular. This is the character of Godfrey, military captain of the First Crusade, as presented in the poem *La Gerusalemme liberate* (1581) by Torquato Tasso (1544–95). The figure of Godfrey does not fit with Vico's other poetic figures. Achilles and Ulysses, for example, are the heroes of a Homeric tradition that reaches back into deepest antiquity. Godfrey is a poetic creation nearly contemporary with Vico's own time. Why does Vico uncharacteristically introduce a poetic figure so close in time to his own? And what does this use of Godfrey teach us about Vico's general theory of poetics and of the course of nations?

Godfrey, the *vero capitano di guerra*

Godfrey is not mentioned in the first or second editions of the *Scienza nuova*, the reference only appearing in the third edition of 1744. Among the historical "principles" of the first book of this edition,

5. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Mythical Thought*, trans. Ralph Manheim, vol. 2 (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1955), 39.

6. Vico, *First New Science*, §262.

Axiom 47 discusses the human mind's delight in uniformity. This tendency is confirmed by the fables of the vulgar concerning famous men. Vico writes, "These fables are ideal truths suited to the merit of those of whom the vulgar tell them; and such falseness to fact as they contain consists simply in failure to give their subjects their due. So that, if we consider the matter well, poetic truth is metaphysical truth, and physical truth which is not in conformity with it should be considered false" (NS, §§204–5). This in itself is a pregnant and grandiose claim. It suggests that the ideal eternal history is more true than any particular history and the poetic character more real than any historical character. Where the historical actuality fails to live up to the ideal, all the worse for history. This is a shocking metaphysical proposition but one little mentioned in Vichian studies.

Vico's axiom continues, "Thence springs this important consideration in poetic theory: the true war chief [*vero capitano di guerra*], for example, is the Godfrey that Torquato Tasso imagines; and all the chiefs who do not conform throughout to Godfrey are not true chiefs of war" (NS, §205). Godfrey is seen by Vico as the archetype of all military command. Great generals are one and all Godfrey, and insofar as they fall short of the character of Godfrey, all the worse for them. Of all of the captains of war that Vico could have named, it is Tasso's Godfrey of Bouillon—the French commander of the First Crusade and afterward the first ruler of the Kingdom of Jerusalem—who is the one model of the "true captain." Vico breaks with his own pattern of drawing his poetic figures from the Homeric poems. He deliberately chooses Godfrey rather than Agamemnon or Hektor or any of the heroic commanders of Virgil or Lucan or the other ancients.

What is anachronistic here, however, is not that Vico draws Godfrey from a poet other than Homer. The anachronism is the historical time in which Tasso's Godfrey was imagined. Tasso is not a poet of deepest antiquity. Homer's reality is shrouded in mystery, and Vico considers Homer himself to be an imaginative universal, the figure of all Grecian poetic wisdom. The Homeric poems, as we shall see, are the collective product of the very end of the first heroic age. They are crucial for understanding the mentality of heroic peoples because they are an authentic production of heroic minds. Dante, whom Vico calls the "Tuscan Homer," likewise composed his poems only at the very end of the second heroic age (NS, §786). The *Divina commedia* embodies the poetic wisdom of a second age of heroic minds. Tasso, on the other hand, was a man of the late Italian Renaissance, a contemporary of the great lights of modernity, Francis Bacon, Galileo Galilei, and

Giordano Bruno. Unlike Homer and Dante, Tasso was a poet of the age of men. Moreover, he was a popular poet, whose great epic poem was well known and often recited in Italy down to Vico's age.

Most Vichian scholars pass over this curiosity without comment. It has been noted most recently by Alexander Bertland, who writes, "It is very unusual for Vico to draw on what could be considered a relatively contemporary popular image. When Vico refers to poetry, it is usually to ancient sources or Dante. This appears to be a unique moment when Vico turned to popular culture to explain his position."[7] Bertland argues that this usage is intended by Vico to demonstrate that poetic imagining remains possible in later times and that "in the ordinary course of life" there remains an archaic tendency to identify the unfamiliar with what is familiar.[8] He does not, however, work out in any detail the implications of Vico's use of Tasso for an understanding of poetic wisdom.

That Vico refers to a near-contemporary poet is more than just a surprise. It upsets the entire notion of poetic universals as the embodiment of the minds of the first two ages. One can imagine the crude Greek minds of the Homeric and pre-Homeric ages believing that every slayer of a beast is literally Hercules or every shrewd dealer is Ulysses. One cannot imagine this of a student of the Academy, trained in Aristotelian class logic. What actual military commanders of the urbane seventeenth century––the century of the Sun King––were ever imagined to be identical to the Godfrey of Tasso? Is Vico suggesting that they judged themselves by this standard? There seem to be two sets of major imaginative universals in the *Scienza nuova*: Jove and the Pantheon of gods, Hercules, Achilles, and Ulysses on the one hand as products of heroic mentality; and Godfrey by himself as the product of a rational mind. Can these two sets be reconciled? What is the meaning and what are the implications of Vico's use of Godfrey as an imaginative universal?

I propose that there are three approaches we may take to get at the answers to these questions. The first is to examine Tasso in reference to other sublime poets; the second is to examine Godfrey in reference to other captains of war; the third is to interrogate the structure of Vico's conception of the European *ricorso* in general.

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7. Alexander U. Bertland, *Myth and Authority: Giambattista Vico's Early Modern Critique of Aristocratic Sovereignty* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2022), 104.

8. Bertland, *Myth and Authority*, 105.

The True Homer and the True Dante

The third book of the *Scienza nuova*, "Discovery of the True Homer," was baffling to readers when it was published and only fully understood decades later, after Friedrich August Wolf published a very similar theory in his *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795).[9] With the renewed interest in Homer inspired by German and English Romantics in the early nineteenth century, Vico's Homeric doctrine received new life. The "Discovery of the True Homer" was translated into English by Henry Nelson Coleridge in the second edition of his *Introductions to the Study of the Greek Classical Poets* (1834),[10] and this remained the only English-language translation of any of Vico's works for over a century.

Prior to Vico, the traditional view held that Homer was a sage and, to some, a philosopher––these terms being understood in a modern sense. Homer was credited with vast reflective wisdom. Vico rejects this view; for him, poetic wisdom and reflective (or "esoteric") wisdom are two very different things. Vico denies "esoteric" wisdom to Homer. He writes, "Such crude, course, wild, savage, volatile, unreasonable or unreasonably obstinate, frivolous, and foolish customs as we set forth . . . can pertain only to men who are like children in the weakness of their minds, like women in the vigor of their imaginations, and like violent youths in the turbulence of their passions; whence we must deny to Homer any kind of esoteric wisdom" (NS, §787).

Vico further claims that the *vero Omero*, the "true Homer," is no Homer at all. He writes, "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." Apart from the vestiges of his poems, it would be easy to conclude that Homer was "a purely ideal poet who never existed as a particular man in the world of nature" (NS, §873). However, these poems do exist, and so Vico chooses a "middle ground": "Homer was an idea or a heroic character of Grecian men insofar as they told their histories in song" (§873). There was not just one single poet named Homer,

9. Wolf seems to have been unfamiliar with Vico at that time. When Vico's theory was finally brought to his attention, he wrote an ill-tempered article trying to undermine the precedence of Vico. See Friedrich August Wolf, "Giambattista Vico über den Homer," *Museum der Alterthums-Wissenschaft* 1 (1807): 555–70.

10. "The Third Book of Vico's *Scienza nuova* [1744]: On the Discovery of the True Homer," trans. Henry Nelson Coleridge, in *Introductions to the Study of the Greek Classic Poets: Designed Principally for the Use of Young Persons at School and College*, ed. H. N. Coleridge, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1834), 73–98.

a blind rhapsode with a particular biography. "Homer" was an imaginative universal, the archetype of a particular tradition of Greek poetry.

For Vico, the Homeric poems were composed by many poets at many times, each adding something to a received literary body. Just as all slayers of beasts were identified as Hercules, all Homeric poets were identified as Homer, the one master reference point of poetic wisdom. These poems are not the labor of individual genius but of the collective genius of an entire people of the heroic era. Vico says that the *Iliad* was the production of the collective Greeks at a young and crude age, when they were given to "sublime passions" and the lust for vengeance; Achilles is "the hero of violence." The *Odyssey* was the production of the collective Greeks of a later age, when "the spirits of Greece had been somewhat cooled by reflection, which is the mother of prudence." Ulysses is "the hero of wisdom" (NS, §879). These two poems show us a nation becoming self-conscious, transitioning from a mentality rooted in sense to a mentality rooted in prudence. The Homeric poems are therefore the bildungsroman of the earliest Greeks. Vico credits "Homer" with being "the first historian of the entire gentile world who has come down to us" because the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are "treasure stores of the customs of early Greece" (§904). Vico's "discovery" of the *vero Omero* is made in the interest of uncovering the true history of the natural law of the gentes. The attribution of the Homeric poems to one particular man has tended to obscure their value as histories of an entire people.[11]

Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) was, on the other hand, certainly a real individual person. We know much about his life, both from his own writings and from substantial tangible evidence. One may still visit the house of Dante in Florence, and one may pay respects at his tomb, at the Basilica di San Francesco in Ravenna. There is no question of his authentic existence.

Vico does not, then, call Dante the "Tuscan Homer" because he too is an imaginative universal, and we must look for another point of identification. Between 1728 and 1730, Vico composed a short essay that Fausto Nicolini titled "Discoverta del vero Dante" ("Discovery of the True Dante").[12] Here, he applies a method similar to that of the *Scienza nuova* to critically assess Dante's poetry. Dante is commended for three reasons. First, he is "the first Italian historian, or one among the first."

11. On Vico's "Discovery of the True Homer," see B. A. Haddock, "Vico's 'Discovery of the True Homer': A Case-Study in Historical Reconstruction," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40 (1979): 583–602.

12. On Vico's attitude toward Dante, see Franco Lanza, "Giambattista Vico: critico di Dante," *Lettere Italiane* 1 (1949): 243–52.

Second, he is "a pure and vast source of beautiful Tuscan sayings." Third, he is "a rare example of a sublime poet."[13] Like Homer, Dante is an invaluable storehouse and dispensary of the customs, language, and self-understanding of the people of a heroic age. He is not, like Homer, a composite of an entire nation, but he is nonetheless the voice of an age and a nation. He is a true historian because he preserves the pure manners and modes of life of the people of his time. His *Commedia* is "the narration of the dead who reside, according to the merits of each, in hell, in purgatory, or in paradise." That is, it is the history of the Christian heroic age. Dante's allegories are the simple expression of "those reflections that the reader of history must make by himself so as to profit from the examples of others" (TD, 58).

Dante's history, like the history of the Homeric poems, is thoroughly imaginative. Vico writes, "In virtue of this same nature of barbarism, which for lack of reflection does not know how to feign, even Dante . . . filled the scenes of his *Comedy* with real persons and portrayed real events in the lives of the dead. . . . In this respect Dante was like the Homer of the *Iliad*" (NS, §817). The Homeric heroes are not real persons, but in a poetic sense they are more real than actual persons. They are the archetypes of certain moral characters, imagined but universal. Because men of the heroic age did not know how to feign, the *Iliad* cannot be considered a deliberate falsehood. It is simply true, by the standard of *fantasia*. Dante's characters are one and all actual persons who lived on the earth, but they are not presented as true to life. They are presented as dead, reaping the punishments or rewards of their actions. They are imaginary, and they embody not the particular traits of this or that person but the universal character of vice or virtue, sin or piety. That is the aspect of their identities that is eternally fixed and preserved in the *Commedia*. Moral character is raised to the status of imaginative universals. Like the early Greeks, Dante did not know how to feign, so his allegories are simple truths. The poetic figures that he creates are fixed points by which the Christian can orient his or her moral behavior. The chaos of ethical decision-making is simplified by the Dantesque poetic map of the afterlife.

"Homer" and Dante both lived in golden ages, when true poetry was possible. Their golden ages are bookended by two different types of barbarism. Vico refers to these two barbarisms as the "barbarism of sense" and the "barbarism of reflection." He writes, "Through long

13. Giambattista Vico, "Discovery of the True Dante," trans. Cristina M. Mazzoni, in *Critical Essays on Dante*, ed. Giuseppe Mazzotta (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991), 58–60, 58–59. Hereafter cited parenthetically as TD.

centuries of barbarism, rust will consume the misbegotten subtleties of malicious wits that have turned them into beasts made more inhuman by the barbarism of reflection than the first men had been made by the barbarism of sense. For the latter displayed a generous savagery, against which one could defend oneself or take flight or be on one's guard; but the former, with a base savagery, under soft words and embraces, plots against the life and fortune of friends and intimates" (NS, §1106). The original barbarism is a barbarism of the body, the second a barbarism of the intellect. In "Discovery of the True Dante," Vico writes, "Poets sing of true songs at the time when, within a certain uniformity in the course taken by their common spirit, nations begin to refine their own barbarousness––which is naturally open and truthful because it lacks reflection that, applied to evil, is the only mother of falsehood" (TD, 58). True songs can only be sung by persons who have developed *fantasia*, with which the human world is made, but have not yet developed reflection, with which this world is petrified. True, "sublime" poetry like that of Homer or Dante "does not let itself be learned by any artifice." It is pure, born of "a loftiness of the spirit" and "a spirit infused with great public virtues" (TD, 59).

Where does the *vero Tasso*, the "true Tasso," fit into this analysis? Homer and Dante are able to produce imaginative universals because they live at the end of heroic times. Their powers of imagination are highly developed, but they have not yet developed the power to dissemble and deceive. They sing true songs of authentic poetic figures because they are not poets of the age of reflection. Their language is pure and their art sublime. Tasso does not seem to fit this mold. Dante represents the very end of "the returned barbarism of Italy" (NS, §786). After him, we enter the refined and polite age of modernity. As has been mentioned already, Tasso was a contemporary of Galileo and the other founders of modern science and method. As a young man, Tasso was a courtier in Ferrara, a situation that requires a pronounced capacity for feigning. His was an age of reflection and an age of men. By this standard, Godfrey is not the production of a pure, sublime poetic imagination but the product of reflection: a conceptual universal rather than an imaginative or poetic universal.

However, we find in Vico no pronouncement that the age of men may *not* produce a sublime poet. If such a poet were to arise in a time dominated by reflective thought, it seems likely that he would be in perpetual conflict with his own age. This is the case with Tasso. Though a courtier, he was notoriously inept at court. He ran afoul of other courtiers, whose jealousy of his fame induced them to slander and insult

him. He suffered from mental instability and acute delusions of persecution, expecting to be at any moment poisoned or denounced to the Inquisition. He was arrested and confined in the madhouse of St. Anna. Finally, certain that the Duke himself meant to murder him, Tasso fled from Ferrara disguised as a peasant.[14] Michel de Montaigne encountered Tasso, then a young man, in Ferrara in the 1570s and recorded his disappointment at seeing the great poet in the throes of paranoid madness, "surviving himself, not recognizing himself or his works," ruined by the "very power and suppleness" of his own mind.[15] The paranoia of Tasso and his inability to integrate into court life were taken as the theme of Goethe's play, *Torquato Tasso*, which sees its eponymous hero lament, "Won't any noble man come to mind / Who suffered more than I have suffered?"[16]

As a poet, Tasso was certainly as close to sublime as any poet to follow Dante. Francesco De Sanctis describes *Gerusalemme liberata* as the great work of modern Italian literature. He writes, "So Italy after all was to have her heroic poem, the poem that was 'something similar' to the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, and the critics should have been satisfied."[17] The misfortune of the poem was the prosaic era in which it was produced: "The *Jerusalem* stumbled into a world no longer poetical, but critical. Feeling for art was exhausted, and inspiration and spontaneity in composing and in judging were spoiled by reasonings founded on conceptions of criticism acknowledged by everyone and looked upon as Holy Writ."[18] Tasso was trained in the criticism of his age, but he was not the product of that age. He was a man out of time. De Sanctis writes, "Tasso, like Dante, was a poet and had a true inspiration, and the spontaneity of the poet atoned in great part for the artifices of the critic."[19]

Gerusalemme liberate, like the *Iliad* and the *Commedia*, is a poetic history. Many of the characters are historical personages, in particular the two major protagonists, Godfrey of Bouillon and Tancred. The First

14. See Robert Milman, *The Life of Torquato Tasso* (London: Henry Colburn, 1850), chaps. 9–11, and John Addington Symonds, "Torquato Tasso," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. Hugh Chisholm, 11th ed., vol. 26 (Cambridge: At the UP, 1911), 444.

15. Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1971), 363.

16. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Torquato Tasso*, trans. Charles E. Passage, in *Plays*, ed. Frank G. Ryder (London: Continuum, 2003), act 5, scene 5, line 240.

17. Francesco De Sanctis, *History of Italian Literature*, trans. Joan Redfern, vol. 2 (New York: Basic, 1959), 636.

18. De Sanctis, *History of Italian Literature*, vol. 2, 636.

19. De Sanctis, *History of Italian Literature*, vol. 2, 642.

Crusade (1096–99) was a historical event. Tasso is a second Dante in the sense that he is a poet of the history of the barbarous times in Italy. Though he did not live in the heroic age of the European *ricorso*, Tasso's poem chronicles this age. The poet's *fantasia* is able to penetrate "the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity" (NS, §331). Literal-minded thinking, which judges everything in terms of itself, fails to understand this. The heroes of the *Gerusalemme* are poetic figures, paragons of warlike virtues, similar to the characters of the *Iliad*. Rinaldo is the hero of violence, Godfrey the hero of wisdom, Tancred the hero of love (a heroic type unknown among the Greeks and embodied in the Homeric epics only by Paris, the enemy).

Vico believed that it was possible to attain a "heroic mind" even in unheroic, prosaic times. In his oration *De mente heroica* (On the Heroic Mind, 1732), Vico exhorts the students of the Royal Academy of Naples to cultivate the heroic mind. He writes, "When I speak of your manifesting the heroic mind, I am not choosing these words lightly. If heroes are those who, as poets say or as they invent, were wont to boast of their divine lineage from 'all-judging Jove,' this much is certain: the human mind, independent of any fictions or fables, does have a divine origin which needs only schooling and breadth of knowledge to unfurl itself."[20] Heroic thought pursues an education of the whole. Modern science is a part of the whole, but it is not the only model for all wisdom. Languages, history, rhetoric, poetry, and the study of fables are other studies that Vico encourages. The heroic mind is able through diligent study to rediscover the mentality of the heroic age. Heroic minds seek the sublime, which is ignored by modern technics. Sublimity, says Vico, refers to "above Nature, God Himself; next, within nature, this whole frame of marvels spread out before us, in which nothing exceeds man in greatness."[21] The mind that embraces the whole has the true sense of measure and knows the proper order of things. Vico says that the road to this goal requires that we "Read the poets!"[22]

Tasso, then, was a heroic mind of the type described by Vico. He was able to transcend the limitations and boundaries of reflective thought endemic to his age and to rediscover the sublime thinking of the age of heroes in the semi-barbaric ages following the fall of Rome and the early days

20. Giambattista Vico, "On the Heroic Mind," trans. Elizabeth Sewell and Anthony C. Sirignano, in *Vico and Contemporary Thought*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo, Michael Mooney, and Donald Phillip Verene, 2 vols. in 1 (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1979), 2:228–45, 2:230. The Italian original is in *Opere*, 1:367–401.

21. Vico, "Heroic Mind," 2:230.

22. Vico, "Heroic Mind," 2:236.

of European Christianity. Through *fantasia*, he gave birth to indelible and unforgettable *universali fantastici*. His misfortune was that he lived in an age in which others no longer oriented themselves by the poetic heroes. His creations were of and for an age not his own. Alexander took Xenophon's *Cyroanabasis* to war with him, but we know of no commander who carried *Gerusalemme* on campaign, turning to Godfrey when in doubt. We might, however, say that this is all the worse for those commanders, who for that reason failed to live up to the prudent wisdom of *il vero capitano di guerra*.

This approach demonstrates that Vico was justified in allowing a modern poet into his canon of sublime poets.[23] It still does not completely answer the question, Why Godfrey? Why is it he whom Vico takes to be the hero of warcraft? To answer this, we must consider other possible alternatives.

Agamemnon and Cesare Borgia

Given Vico's interests and tendencies, the obvious choice for a paragon of military command drawn from the history of poetics is Agamemnon, not Godfrey. Agamemnon would fit in more closely with the exemplars Achilles and Ulysses and would tie into Vico's analysis of the "true Homer." However, as Andrea Moudarres points out, Agamemnon is both (a) a deeply flawed leader who is unable to hold the Greek troops together and (b) lacking in the virtues of a Christian commander.[24] Both of these issues are worth keeping in mind. Vico explicitly derides the character of Agamemnon in the *Scienza nuova*. He writes, "What name under heaven more appropriate than sheer stupidity can be given to the wisdom of [Homer's] captain, Agamemnon? For he has to be compelled by Achilles to do his duty in restoring Chryseis to Chryses, her father, priest of Apollo, the god who, on account of this rape, was decimating the Greek army with a cruel pestilence" (NS, §783). Agamemnon is also condemned for "wrongfully stealing Briseis from Achilles, who bore in his person the fate of Troy" (§783). He is an imperfect commander because he is governed by passion and places his own interests ahead of those of the Greek army. The pride and egotism of Agamemnon sow division in his army, whereas Godfrey's leadership fosters unity: "His soldiers wild, to

23. A Vichian might use the same reasoning in idle moments to contemplate what later moderns Vico might have considered true poets and what imaginative universals we continue to live by today. The American mythos is shaped in large part by images inherited from Walt Whitman and, in the following century, Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg.

24. Andrea Moudarres, "Carafa and Godfrey: Tasso's Influence on Vico's Conception of War," *New Vico Studies* 25 (2007): 53–66.

brawls and mutines prest, / Reduced he to peace; so heaven him blest."[25] This criticism of Agamemnon comes by way of Vico's demonstration that Homer was not a "wise man" or philosopher in the modern sense. A philosopher seeks to "tame the ferocity of the vulgar whose teachers the poets are," not to "arouse admiration of them in the vulgar in order that they should take pleasure in them" (NS, §782).

Further, Moudarres emphasizes that Godfrey is the paragon of Christian piety as well as warcraft. It is piety that inspires Godfrey's quest, as he says in his initial address to the Christian army:

> But this was the scope of our former thought,
> Of Sion's fort to scale the noble wall,
> The Christian folk from bondage to have brought,
> Wherein, alas, they long have lived thrall,
> In Palestine an empire to have wrought
> Where godliness might reign perpetual,
> And none be left, that pilgrims might denay
> To see Christ's tomb, and promis'd vows to pay. (Tasso, JD, 1.23)[26]

The final lines of *Gerusalemme liberate* show us the victorious Godfrey as he removes his bloody coat and hastens to the high temple: "And there he hung up his arms, and there he bows / His knees, there pray'd, and there perform'd his vows" (Tasso, JD, 20.144). Apart from his piety, the particularly Christian virtue that Godfrey possesses is mercy. When the Saracen army is defeated, Prince Altamore of Samarcand surrenders to Godfrey and proposes a ransom of great wealth. Godfrey scorns this proposal: "God shield (quoth Godfrey) that my noble mind / Should praise and virtue so by profit measure" (Tasso, JD, 20.142). He allows Altamore to go free and to retain all of his lands and possessions. Mercy is a virtue only for captains of Christianity, not for the poetic leaders of the ancient Greeks.

However, one must beware of overstating Vico's interest in Godfrey along purely Christian lines. He does not say that Godfrey is the "true chief of war of Christendom" but the "true chief of war." It is true that Vico was a cautious writer. The Inquisition was not official but was still active in Naples, and Vico was careful to avoid the displeasure of the

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25. Torquato Tasso, *Jerusalem Delivered*, trans. Edward Fairfax (New York: Capricorn, 1968), canto 1, stanza 1. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Tasso, JD; for each quotation, the canto number is presented, followed by the stanza number.

26. Moudarres (60–61) connects Godfrey's divine inspiration to a Vichian doctrine: "Poetic morality began with piety, which was ordained by providence to found the nations, for among them all piety is proverbially the mother of all the moral, economic, and civil virtues. Religion alone has the power to make us practice virtue" (NS, §503).

Church.[27] This does not, however, mean that his admiration of Godfrey was purely an appeasement for the Church. The passage in the *Scienza nuova* that discusses Godfrey was included only in the third edition of the work, published in the final year of Vico's life, after the first two editions of the book had avoided ecclesiastical censure. Moreover, if Vico had been motivated by an interest in elevating Christian virtues to the status of imaginative universals, his primary poetic figures would not have been Achilles and Ulysses. Neither of these heroes demonstrates the traditional virtues of a good Christian in any degree. Ulysses is a liar and a trickster, whose long journey home is the result of his impiety (blinding the son of Poseidon). Achilles falls under much the same criticism that Vico levels against Agamemnon: he is proud and cruel, and his childish distemper nearly costs the Greeks the Trojan War. Vico writes that his qualities "were in complete contrast with the three ideas of the philosophers," particularly the idea of justice (NS, §667).

The imaginative universals, as we have seen, have nothing at all to do with philosophical doctrines of justice or morality. These latter are the concepts of philosophy, not of poetic wisdom. The universals are the fixed points of orientation for minds strong in imagination and weak in reason. They do not posit an ideal world of reflection. They simply record the character of a true, lived world common to all human beings. Tasso's Godfrey is a universal character because he personifies those traits on which successful military command at all times and in all places depends. In Godfrey, those experienced in war recognize the true captain; in the true captain, they recognize Godfrey.

If not Agamemnon, whom else might Vico have considered a *vero capitano di guerra*? Students of modern philosophy will at once have an answer ready at hand. Vico certainly would have had in mind a second figure who had been put forth as the archetype of modern military command: Cesare Borgia. Borgia was the "paragon" of Machiavelli's *Principe*, which was the foundational book of modern political theory. I place the word "paragon" in quotes because one must contrast what Machiavelli says with what he means. Borgia is the primary figure on whom Machiavelli models his "Prince," and he is praised above all other contemporary rulers and captains. He is nevertheless deeply flawed and ultimately fails to live up to the principles of Machiavellianism. Because of his blunders, he dies a failure. It is a matter of scholarly debate how

27. On Vico's religious caution, see Fausto Nicolini, *La religiosità di Giambattista Vico: quattro saggi* (Bari: Laterza, 1949), and Gustavo Costa, "Vico e l'Inquisizione," *Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres* 2 (1999): 93–124.

literally Machiavelli's praise of Borgia is to be taken.[28]

Cesare Borgia (1475–1507) was a cruel, unscrupulous, and wildly ambitious ruler. On the surface, he is a perfect model for Machiavelli's notion of the new prince of modernity. The son of Pope Alexander VI and a *condottiero* under Louis XII, Borgia was able to carve out a state for himself in Central Italy through conquest and bribery. Machiavelli writes, "If one considers all the steps of the duke [Borgia], one will see that he had laid himself great foundations for future power, which I do not judge superfluous to discuss; for I do not know what better teaching I could give to a new prince than the example of his actions."[29] Machiavelli commends Borgia's actions in numerous passages in the *Principe*: for employing mercenary arms when needed and then eliminating them once their purpose was served (55); for reducing the Romagna to peace through his great cruelty (65); for taking Imola by exploiting the people's hatred of their rulers (87). These are the acts of an unprincipled tyrant, a commander who places himself above all law and all human rights. Through his viciousness, he achieved the heights of political success; he is the model not of virtue but of *virtù*.

However, Machiavelli's encomium to Borgia is tinged from the start with the suggestion that he was not, in fact, a paragon of princedom. Immediately before praising Borgia as the model of the "Prince," Machiavelli writes, "[Borgia] acquired his state through the fortune of his father and lost it through the same, notwithstanding the fact that he made use of every deed and did all those things that should be done by a prudent and virtuous man to put his roots in the states that the arms and fortune of others had given him. For, as was said above, whoever does not lay his foundations at first might be able, with great virtue, to lay them later, although they might have to be laid with hardship for the architect and with danger to the building" (27). Following his praise, Machiavelli continues, "If his orders did not bring profit to him, it was not his fault, because this arose from an extraordinary and extreme malignity of fortune" (27). Borgia acquired a state but could not hold onto it. His power was ultimately based on the power of the papacy. He failed to establish himself in his own right among the ecclesiastics who backed his father, and when Alexander died, Cesare received no support from the papacy. He was a victim of *fortuna*, "fortune," which is a cardinal sin for a

28. See Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978), 68.

29. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998), 27. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Machiavelli, *Prince*.

Machiavellian prince. The prince may possess either *virtù* or *fortuna*, and "he who has relied less on fortune has maintained himself more" (22). Those who have a state given to them, like Borgia, "rest simply on the will and fortune of whoever has given a state to them, which are two very inconstant and unstable things" (26). The wise prince learns to master and minimize fortune by transforming what he acquires by the graces of another into something fully his own.

Il principe is an epochal book, the first work of the modern age of political science.[30] It is also the best-known work in the modern history of Italian letters. Vico understood Machiavelli's privileged place in the history of political philosophy and particularly Italian political philosophy. Giuseppe Mazzota writes that "the founders of modernity are for [Vico] Machiavelli, the Tacitists of the seventeenth century, Galileo, Descartes, Bacon, and Spinoza. In Naples their epigones are legion."[31] Nevertheless, Vico seldom mentions Machiavelli and refers more often to the *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* than to *Il principe*. This is probably because Vico views Machiavellianism as a wrong turn in the history of ideas.

In the conclusion to the *Scienza nuova*, Vico writes, "Hence Epicurus, who believes in chance, is refuted by the facts, along with his followers Hobbes and Machiavelli; and so are Zeno and Spinoza, who believe in fate. The evidence clearly confirms the contrary position of the political philosophers, whose prince is the divine Plato, who shows that providence directs human institutions" (NS, §1109). This critique points us to another of Vico's writings. In 1731, Vico composed several *correzioni, miglioramenti e aggiunte* ("corrections, meliorations, and additions") that were intended for publication in the third volume of the *Scienza nuova* but that were never included. One of these *aggiunte* is a short "Reprehension [*Riprensione*]" of the metaphysics of Descartes, Spinoza, and Locke. In this "Reprehension," Vico characterizes the two directions of modern philosophy as Epicurian and Stoic, and he takes each of these to be an error. The Cartesian and Spinozistic philosophies are, for Vico, the modern version of the Stoic doctrine of "deaf necessity." Locke and his fellow materialists are the modern version of the Epicurean doctrine of "blind chance."[32] The former philosophers "make

30. The particularly revolutionary invention of Machiavelli was the replacement of "truth" with "effectual truth," that is, truth as determined by success (Machiavelli, *Prince,* 61).

31. Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The New Map of the World: The Poetic Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1999), 4.

32. Vico, "The Reprehension of the Metaphysics of René Descartes, Benedict Spinoza, and John Locke," in *Giambattista Vico: Keys to the* New Science*: Translations, Commentaries, and*

God an infinite mind, subject to fate, in an infinite body," while the latter "attribute to God body alone, and chance together with body" (NS, §335). Both camps tacitly deny the notion of meaning in history. The thought of modernity fluctuates between these two extremes, at one moment submitting to necessity and at the next giving itself up to the vicissitudes of fortune.

The conclusion to the *Scienza nuova* places Machiavelli in the same category as Locke and Epicurus. This means that Vico considers Machiavelli a materialist whose thinking stops at the external aspect of bodies and fails to penetrate to the true essence of things. He writes, "From body is born time; and from body and from time, which is measured with the motion of body (provided that it is not mind that regulates the motion of body) comes chance."[33] Vico holds that, if we begin from the doctrines of matter in motion and random chance, it is impossible to ever arrive at a socially grounded ethical sense. Against necessity and chance, Vico places providence at the center of the *Scienza nuova*.[34] Providence is the source of the *storia ideale eterna* of nations. The invisible hand of providence (which concept is open to both religious and secular interpretations)[35] is the source of reason in history. Without providence, the world is just one thing after another. For Vico, the Machiavellian vision is a universe of blind chance, a chaos of matter in motion. There is no order in history, no direction for the human species. A world of blind chance is a world without fixed points of reference because these fixed points depend upon a certain level of likeness and regularity. The Machiavellian cannot have a Jove to fear or an Achilles or Ulysses to emulate. There is only power, which is ephemeral and momentary. There is only a Cesare Borgia, elevated to a throne by *fortuna* and toppled in turn by *fortuna* when it sours.

Machiavelli offers Borgia as the model of the modern prince, and this is a true statement as regards the Epicurean reality of the modern world.

Essays, ed. Thora Ilin Bayer and Donald Phillip Verene (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2009), 179–82.

33. Vico, "Reprehension," 182.

34. "The conduct of divine providence in this matter is one of the things whose rationale is the chief business of our Science" (NS, §2).

35. James Morrison observes, "Interpretations [of Vico's 'providence'] are of two kinds. The first is the traditional orthodox Catholic one, which maintains that the religious elements of Vico's thought are essential to his teaching and are ultimately combinable with other teachings. The second interpretation (most notably represented by Croce and the Italian idealists) admits the presence of a religious element but regards it as ultimately inessential and archaic." James C. Morrison, "How to Interpret the Idea of Divine Providence in Vico's *New Science*," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 12.4 (1979): 256–61, 256–57.

However, to take Borgia as the imaginative universal for a captain of war is dangerous and decadent. Vico counters Machiavelli by offering another prince already ingrained in the imaginative consciousness of the Italian genius: Tasso's Godfrey, a man of virtue rather than *virtù*, a man who knows how to wage war and how to hang up his bloody arms when the battle is over. Where Cesare is a master of feigning and cunning, Godfrey has a simple and heroic mind. Godfrey, not Cesare, is the true image of a captain of men. Vico offers modern Italians an exemplar from their own heroic past by whom they can orient their thinking, rather than understanding themselves solely in terms of the Machiavellian prince.

Considerations on the *ricorsi*

A final approach to assessing the significance of Vico's use of Godfrey may be essayed by interrogating the *ricorso* as a whole. I have so far mentioned the *ricorso* several times without discussing what this means in the context of Vico's new science of the nations. The *ricorso* is the re-course, the second course, traversed by every nation. Nations have a lifespan, just as living organisms do. The ideal eternal history begins in the darkness and obscurity of the forests, from which civilizations arise, flourish for a time, and eventually become dissolute and crumble. The age of gods is followed by the age of heroes, which is followed in turn by the age of men. The age of men brings reflection and with it a new form of barbarism, the "barbarism of reflection." Through craft and cunning, men destroy themselves and eventually return to the forests. This history begins anew after an indefinite time, and its second course is different in details from the first but the same in general outline.[36]

Like Vico, we live in the *ricorso* of European culture. Because this is our own age, the reader would expect a maximum of clarity but finds discussion of the *ricorso* sparse and opaque. In many ways, the returned barbarism of Europe is murkier than the original barbarism of deepest antiquity. Vico says as much: "We shall bring more light to bear on the period of the second barbarism, which has remained darker than that of the first" (NS, §1046).[37] Interpreters of the first darkness have the benefit of a rich philological apparatus. The earliest and purest customs and manners of the ancient Greeks and Romans are preserved

36. James Joyce characterizes this cycle as "Eggburst, eggblend, eggburial and hatch-as-hatch-can." *Finnegans Wake* (1939; repr., New York: Viking, 1961), 614.

37. Vico later reiterates this with emphasis: "So much more obscure have we found the times of the second [barbarism] than those of the first!" (NS, §1074).

(though imperfectly) in language and mythology. The dark ages after the fall of Rome present greater difficulty because there is a muddle of languages and customs, a jumble of cross-influences and inheritances. Furthermore, Vico's scholarship focuses on Roman history and law; he is largely indifferent to modern history. Although the fifth book of the *Scienza nuova* focuses on the *ricorso*, this is by far the shortest book. Vico appears relatively uninterested in the *ricorso*.[38] We, the readers, are left to fill in many of the blanks of its structure ourselves. Therefore, the considerations that I offer in what follows are highly speculative, based only on the slightest hints that Vico offers.

Book Five of the *Scienza nuova* is titled "The Recourse of Human Institutions which the Nations Take When They Begin to Rise Again." Vico divides his discussion into three chapters, which discuss the three ages of the *ricorso*. The first invokes Christianity as the characteristic phenomenon of the new course of history. The divine age of the *ricorso* pertains to the period when "Catholic kings everywhere, in order to defend the Christian religion, of which they are the protectors, donned the dalmatics of deacons and consecrated their royal persons" (NS, §1048). These kings are the fathers of the Church, and they replace the fathers of families of the *corso*. The earliest Christian age was also an age of Holy War: "Thus there was a return in truth of what were called the pure and pious wars of the heroic peoples" (§1049). All authority and all rule came directly from God. Following this period came a heroic age: "These divine times were followed by certain heroic times, in consequence of the return of a certain distinction between almost opposite natures, the heroic and the human" (§1057). The feudal laws and fiefdoms are expressions of the heroic mind that distinguishes human beings by nobility. Heroic aristocracies replace theocratic rule, and the medieval armed courts are the mirror of the Roman Quirites (§§1057–87).

Vico does not devote the final chapter of his fifth book to his own times, the age of men. Instead, he gives a "Survey of the Ancient and the Modern World of Nations." He has only a few remarks to make concerning contemporary Europe: Christianity is universal; aristocracies are in decline and have been replaced in many places by popular commonwealths; sovereign powers tend to unite in leagues. In a single sentence, he gives the eulogy of modernity but with dubious sincerity:

38. Contra this interpretation, see Mazzotta, chapter 9: "The *ricorso*: A New Way of Seeing." Mazzotta argues that "Vico's ultimate, abiding concern is the fate of modernity and the future of history" (209), that "the *ricorso* crystallizes the vision of what can be made and remade" (233), and that the *ricorso* is the cornerstone of Vico's *Scienza nuova*. Despite this strong counter-interpretation, I stand behind my claim that Vico is generally uninterested in the *ricorso*.

"Christian Europe is everywhere radiant with such humanity that it abounds in all the good things that make for the happiness of human life, ministering to the comforts of the body as well as to the pleasures of the mind and spirit" (NS, §1094). Unspoken, but present to the mind of the active reader, is Vico's Axiom 66. A people who have attained pleasure and comfort must shortly "grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad and waste their substance" (§241, quoted above). Also present to the mind is the "barbarism of reflection," which is the negative upshot of the age of men, pervading and corrupting all institutions. "Happiness" is the principle sought by human minds, and it is very different from the "nobility" sought by heroic minds. The will to happiness is, for Vico, the beginning of the end, for it values good living over right living.

How are we to piece together a chronology of the *ricorso*? At what precise moment do we transition from one age to another? Does this happen all at once—or slowly and by piecemeal? Vico does not tell us, nor could he. The ideal eternal history is a general schema, differing in particulars for every nation. To think with Vico is to resist strict demarcations and boundaries. There is not a moment in time when the genius of a nation lays down its direct obedience to its gods and falls under the banner of stern aristocracy, nor is there a single moment when reflective thought springs forth from the spirit of the people writ large. The Vichian ages are not hermetically sealed boxes. Nations rise and fall over long periods of time, and the internal movements and developments of these nations likewise play out over time.

Vico tells us that Dante arrived at the end of the heroic age of the *ricorso*, the end of the "returned barbarism of Italy" (NS, §786, quoted above). This suggests that the age of man begins somewhere shortly after 1300, when Dante made his descent into the *Inferno*. A diligent, literal-minded person might fix the transition from the heroic to the human world on, say, April 26, 1336, when Petrarch ascended Mont Ventoux. Philosophers (as opposed to theologians) arise only in the age of humans, replacing the poets as the sages of the race. Vico writes, "As much as the poets first sensed in the way of vulgar wisdom, the philosophers later understood in the way of esoteric wisdom; so that the former may be said to have been the sense and the latter the intellect of the human race" (§363). The Italian Renaissance saw the rise of secular philosophy, and the humanists of that time were conscious of their own break with tradition. The heroes of modernity—Machiavelli, Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, and so forth—are all philosophers.

However, Vico tells us that Dante was himself "learned in the loftiest esoteric knowledge" (NS, §817). Even though he was a product of

the heroic age, he was able to think with the moderns. Philosophic or esoteric knowledge is therefore possible to heroic minds, however little it may have been exercised. Likewise, we have seen that Tasso was able to attain the simple truth of sublime poets despite his location in the midst of the age of reason. The capacity for heroic thought does not simply vanish from the face of the species with the advent of the telescope. Here we have to deal with general tendencies of the human mind. A transitional phase cannot be quick or neat but must entail centuries of struggle between rival forms of thinking: poetic against rational, heroic against reflective, authoritarian against democratic. This struggle manifests differently in different persons and places, and its outcome has been the specific character of modernity.

On this looser reading of the *ricorso*, Dante would represent a symbolic end and summation of a poetic age but not an absolute terminus. After Dante is Petrarch, after Petrarch Ariosto, after Ariosto Tasso. Sublime poets continue to compose true songs even after their age loses the ears with which to hear. Tasso, though nearly contemporary to Vico's age in time, is little contemporaneous to the people of that age in spirit and mentality. I suggest that this is how we ought to think about Vico's three ages, not as strict, monadic periods with fixed limits but as protean and indefinite, shading one into another.

There is perhaps one final reason that Vico fixes on Tasso as his most contemporary exemplar of *poiesis*, which I mention only in figurative brackets. Tasso died in 1595. Descartes was born in 1596. It is possible that Vico had this correlation in mind, consciously or unconsciously. Descartes is, for Vico, the epitome of the reflective philosopher and of the neo-Stoic doctrine of necessity that Vico saw as a wrong turn in philosophy. The writings of Descartes dominated the thought of Naples in Vico's time. He discusses in his *Vita* returning to Naples after nine years' absence "a stranger [*forestiero*] in his own land," finding "the physics of Descartes at the height of its renown among the men of letters."[39] Much of Vico's early philosophical writing is directed against Cartesianism, and we learn from the "Reprehension" that Vico saw the doctrine of providence underlying the *Scienza nuova* as an intentional corrective of Descartes. It is a possibility—no more than this but no less—that, for Vico, the birth of Descartes is the point of no return, the

39. Vico, *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1975), 132. The Italian original is in *Opere*, 1:3–85. On Vico's criticism of Descartes, see José M. Bermudo, "Vico y Descartes," *Cuadernos sobre Vico* 9/10 (1998): 23–41, and Paolo Rossi, *Le sterminate antichità: Studi vichiani* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1969), chap. 1.

moment in history that marks the strict end of the heroic age. In the Cartesian world, the human mind has achieved its rational completion, and poetic wisdom is fully extinguished.

Conclusion

I have pursued three lines of inquiry concerning Vico's use of Godfrey as an imaginative universal. The first placed Tasso in a poetic family tree with Homer and Dante. I showed that Tasso fits Vico's criteria for a sublime poet. The second compared Godfrey to rival figures of the *vero capitano di guerra*. Here, I argued that Godfrey was intended by Vico as a deliberate substitute for Cesare Borgia as the archetype of a post-Roman captain of war. Finally, I have meditated upon the Vichian *ricorso* and suggested that the ages of the *ricorso* are not to be taken as fixed but as fluid. These three lines of inquiry, taken as a whole, answer the question of why Vico so uncharacteristically employs a poetic figure from near-contemporary popular culture in his explanation of imaginative universals. Godfrey is a true captain of war, and Tasso is a true poet. By using Godfrey, Vico intimates that the Italian genius of the eighteenth century was still capable of orienting itself by way of heroic figures and still capable of thinking with the poets, however rare such thinking may have become beneath the glaring sun of Enlightenment rationalism. To recognize one's own self in the heroes of the nation's past is to remain tethered to that past and to keep a grasp—however tenuous—on one's own origins. As long as this remains possible, there is a thread of Ariadne, a way out from complete submersion in the barbarism of reflection, which is the perpetual cause of dissolution.