

## Vico on Metaphor: Implications for Rhetorical Criticism

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In a thoughtful and comprehensive assessment of the concept of metaphor, Terence Hawkes suggests that there are two fundamental views of this term in the history of language.<sup>1</sup> The first, or classical perspective sees metaphor as a detachable element in language; a device added to language or used to achieve a specific, prejudged effect. Hawkes' second view of metaphor is termed the "romantic" perspective. In this view, metaphor is considered a crucial element in all languages. Hawkes argues that language is "vitaly metaphorical" because reality becomes the end product of an essentially metaphorical interaction between words and the "hurrying" of mental activity that regularly occurs in a culture.<sup>2</sup>

The observations made by Hawkes on metaphor raise some important questions for the student of language or rhetoric. Contemporary rhetoricians and philosophers of language have largely ignored writers that have explored the "romantic" view of metaphor. The work of the Italian rhetorician Giambattista Vico has, in particular, been neglected by modern scholars. By ignoring Vico and his major treatise, *The New Science*, contemporary rhetoricians have failed to take advantage of his usefulness in exploring the historical processes of rhetoric and metaphor. This essay, therefore, will consider how Vico's theory of metaphor may be used by rhetorical theorists or critics as an important tool in deciphering the mental activity of speakers in several contexts. First, this paper will evaluate how several contemporary writers have assessed Vico's place in rhetorical theory. Next, Vico's theory of metaphor is examined as it was argued in *The New Science*. Finally, Vico's position is summarized as it may provide added insight for viewing rhetoric as a historically evolving metaphorical phenomenon.

In 1974, Vincent M. Bevilacqua suggested that Vico's work may answer the call for a superior approach to research in speech communication.<sup>3</sup> Observing the growing lack of confidence with

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the behavioral science approach to human communication, Bevilacqua urged a consideration of *Vico's* notion of "process." Since *Vico* in the 1700s launched a similar movement against René Descartes and his disciples, Bevilacqua's contentions were appropriate. Bevilacqua's article provides a good overview of *Vico's* epistemology. The key to understanding how language works for man, he concluded, was *Vico's* perspective on man's active imagination. This position is significant because of man's: "conspicuously metaphorical character of language which results from the natural collective and inferential powers of memory and the imagination to create knowledge. . . ."<sup>4</sup>

Bevilacqua's summary of *Vico's* metaphorical or "poetic" logic in language was very insightful. Because cultures have similar analytical categories into which knowledge is placed Bevilacqua argued that *Vico's* position on metaphor was unique. Man, by his very nature, accepts the general "topical" categories of a culture but is not limited by these. Bevilacqua noted that it is possible for man to confront "new data" which is perceived in resemblance among things supposedly "disparate" in the cultural system. By creatively linking new facts in human experience outside culturally accepted categories, man "creates new knowledge."<sup>5</sup> Given this perspective on how knowledge is invented from a common topical system, Bevilacqua placed *Vico's New Science* clearly within the tradition of rhetorical invention.

The general observations by Bevilacqua on *Vico's* theory of rhetoric are very provocative. Many opportunities, however, were missed to explain more fully how *Vico's* approach to metaphor could provide an alternative to classical topoi as a framework to understand man's creation of knowledge. It is very clear that Bevilacqua was much too eager to place *Vico's New Science* within the classical rhetorical tradition. Certainly *Vico* was an important Italian rhetorician, but Bevilacqua's essay diminishes the unique contribution that *The New Science* made to rhetoric's heritage. The shallow treatment of *The New Science* and its unparalleled expansion of the concept of metaphor leaves unanswered many questions about *Vico's* proper role as a philosopher of language.

Writing in 1976, Alessandro Giuliani focused on *Vico's* rhetorical philosophy from a broader perspective than did Bevilacqua.<sup>6</sup> Giuliani's essay noted that *Vico's* contribution to rhetoric recognized the intimate relationship between language

and thought. Metaphor, Giuliani observed, serves as the part of language that "enjoys absolute preeminence."<sup>7</sup> After outlining Vico's position on language, however, Giuliani contended that these contributions were firmly indebted to the Greek and Roman rhetorical tradition. Giuliani gleaned Vico's lectures on rhetoric and examined the distinct similarities between the lecture *On the Study Methods of Our Time* and the "Theory of Controversy" in Cicero's forensic rhetoric. After pointing out how Vico viewed quality, quantity, and definition, in argumentative situations, Giuliani placed this discussion into the broad topical tradition of rhetoric. Giuliani ended his essay with the conclusion that Vico's position on topics had much in common with Chaim Perelman's *New Rhetoric*.

The most glaring omission from Giuliani's summary of Vico's position on rhetoric was any consideration of *The New Science*. Giuliani's analysis on Vico's lines of stasis was much more detailed than was Bevilacqua's. They both recognized an important feature of Vico's rhetorical theory. However, these expositions on Vico's rhetoric lectures missed the unique and complex explanation of metaphor in human knowledge development that was explored in *The New Science*.

A standard textbook treatment of Vico's rhetorical theory is available in James Golden, Goodwin Berquist, and William Coleman's textbook, *The Rhetoric of Western Thought*.<sup>8</sup> In a chapter assessing the rhetorical contributions of several "Epistemologists," Vico is viewed as playing an important role in countering the "mathematical certainty" theory of Descartes during the 1700s. Golden *et al.* argue that Vico saw man as locked into a continuous search for the truth about an unchanging physical world. Since the rules of formal logic were, in fact, "created" by man's powerful imagination, scholars should look to the human mind as the true source of knowledge of the external world.<sup>9</sup> Given the capability of the mind to imagine, Golden *et al.* conclude that Vico envisioned rhetoric as man's method of using poetic language to create reality within a topical philosophy.

A disturbing feature of the *Rhetoric of Western Thought's* review of Vico's epistemology is the neglect of metaphor. Despite an extensive outline of the differences between Descartes and Vico, the term "metaphor" is never directly used to explain this contrast in seventeenth century thought. The only conclusion that Golden *et al.* venture from their analysis is that Vico's position:

“served as a model and inspiration for later authors representing the psychological-philosophical school of rhetoric.”<sup>10</sup>

*The Rhetoric of Western Thought* may be technically correct, but it misses Vico’s insights on metaphor. As a comprehensive textbook of rhetoric in Western society, it is ironic that Golden *et al.* omit a careful discussion of Vico’s function of metaphorical thought in man’s development. This forced tendency to categorize the deliberately unique Vico, however, is a typical practice for most contemporary writers on rhetorical theory. In order to clarify how Vico viewed metaphor as a powerful mental force in man’s mental development, I now turn to focused discussion of *The New Science*. A most insightful interpreter, Isaiah Berlin, not only clarified Vico’s ideas, but has argued for assignment of Vico to a more significant place in modern language philosophy. For Berlin, Vico was not only a profoundly original thinker; he was also largely “neglected and forgotten” in his own time.<sup>11</sup> Berlin pointed out that in contemporary language philosophy Vico is finally being given the attention he deserves. This was partially true because:

Vico virtually invented a new field of social knowledge, which embraces social anthropology, the comparative and historical studies of philology, linguistics, ethnology, jurisprudence, literature, mythology, in effect, the history of civilization in the broadest sense.<sup>12</sup>

While Berlin was pleased with the current attention being given to Vico, he was concerned with scholars who have the “permanent temptation to read too much into him.”<sup>13</sup> This change seems to be especially warranted concerning Vico’s “masterpiece,” the *New Science*. The first edition of this work appeared in 1725 and was intended, as Berlin noted, to “attack the claims of the Cartesian school in the very field in which it felt itself strongest and most impregnable.”<sup>14</sup>

Vico began *The New Science* with a preview of the principles on which he planned to elaborate later in the work. It is important to point out that in this first section of the volume careful attention was given to the proper place of language. The idea of the book, said Vico, was to study the common nature of nations and the origins of institutions that comprise them.<sup>15</sup> Three different ages of man can be identified in the history of man. Corresponding to these three ages, inhabitants of nations spoke three

different kinds of languages. Articulate speech, the kind used by all nations today, evolved from the other two primitive ones through a poetic process.

Poetic language has a special meaning for Vico. This special type of locution is necessary, he believed, to help the inhabitants of nations "explain and understand everyday interactions and occurrence."<sup>16</sup> During all three ages of nations, the ages of Gods, Heroes, and Man, language is required to provide people in a culture with a "common ground of truth." As cultures became more refined, they also altered their languages to maintain this communal structure. Vico argued:

There must be in the nature of human institutions a mental language common to all nations which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things have diverse aspects.<sup>17</sup>

Vico suggested in *The New Science* that once this common mental language is discovered scholars will be able to "construct a mental vocabulary" common to all the languages. Vico saw this vocabulary not as separate from but intrinsically part of the mental activity by speakers in a culture. Things and activities in a culture are made common to all its members by a creative faculty of the mind. Since each member of a culture has a need to contribute to and be part of this common truth, this mental vocabulary grows through the stages of nations.

In the most primitive of nations, individuals were ignorant and thus "created Gods out of fear."<sup>18</sup> Vico called this a time of false religions, but it was a time in man's history when a Jove was necessary to explain floods, lightning, and other violent acts in nature. All these actions were related mentally to the personal disposition and intervention by Gods. Metaphorically, lightning became bolts from Jove for most people in a culture.

As man progressed, things in nature that could not be explained or understood came to be thought of in heroic terms. Tales of great valor which confronted or tamed nature evolved in man's mental language as a new form of common ground. This kind of heroic poetry became necessary, Vico said, as people separated themselves and formed new associations within nations. Knowledge between people depended more on local communities, thus stories of heroism served not only to provide com-

monness of truth for their mental language but also to provide a uniformity of history for those born into the culture. This kind of poetry would require a higher level of metaphorical images than did the divine poets.<sup>19</sup>

The most advanced stage of nations, according to Vico, would be the age of man. As a civilization grew more complex and man could not explain causes in nature by analogy with the divine or heroic, he turned to himself. Vico argued that in this age man's poetic imagination began to give human sense and passion to insensate things.<sup>20</sup> Early men, as poets, ascribed human qualities to things in nature. This naming process created new fables that sought to explain man's relationship to the world around him. To state that something resides in the "bowels of the earth," for example, provides a mental relationship that would be commonly understood by people in a culture. In this fashion, metaphors relating a human quality to a thing in nature became a fable in brief.<sup>21</sup>

The uniquely human ability to create metaphors relating to human anatomy became tempered by the fact that the mind is "naturally impelled to take delight in uniformity." Vico observed from this principle that evolving, civilized man sought consistency in comprehending his day-to-day circumstances. This new age of men, therefore, moved away from simple metaphors of gods and heroes and into a state where man himself "became the measure of all things."<sup>22</sup> It is important to note, however, that man did not instantly forget the older metaphors. These divine and heroic images remain in the overall mental vocabulary of a culture.

Once new poetic characters were created to explain and understand nature, a historical transition in the relationship of this knowledge to man occurred. The particular relationships expressed in these new metaphors were now elevated into universals or parts united with the other parts, and together they made up new wholes. Vico explained that:

the first men, the children, as it were of the human race, were not 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 models or ideal portraits, to reduce all the particular species which resembled them.<sup>23</sup>

Even as the world became more complex and people in a culture grew apart from nature, it was Vico's position that man's thought and mental language of images developed common

broad metaphors which could provide the basis for understanding among people. The early fables about gods and heroes, which were so closely linked to a fear of uncontrolled nature, lost their original meanings, but the creative poetic imagination of the mind invented new knowledge by joining together what were once separate images into new metaphors. With further development, these broad "signified abstract forms," which related parts to wholes, became words.<sup>24</sup> Vico, however, wanted modern man never to neglect the fact that this process of word formation must be traced through metaphors. "General metaphor," he concluded, "makes up the great body of the language among all nations."<sup>25</sup>

The rhetorical implications of Vico's analysis of the metaphorical genesis of thought and language development provide numerous directions for writers in the study of the history or philosophy of communication, Berlin suggests that the *New Science* offers researchers many unique ways to understand the history of culture. First, since early man possessed a poetic sense that was more acute than current usage, we must try to "project ourselves into minds very remote to our own and endowed with these unfamiliar powers."<sup>26</sup> Primitive or early stages of developing cultures must be viewed with the knowledge that man was closest to nature and his natural talk dealt with the environment in metaphorical terms. Second, Berlin argues that Vico's principle that language "tells us the history of things signified by words" provides the historian with the key in which to comprehend how meanings of words change by its modifications in, and response to, the successive phases of civilization.<sup>27</sup> Finally, Berlin contends that Vico's central notion concerning the development of the "morphology" of a symbolic system is with the growth of the culture of which it is the central organ.<sup>28</sup> Given this principle, historians of rhetoric could construct a dictionary of the basic mental language or ideas common to people in a given culture. Such central ideas to be considered would be: "gods," "family," "authority," "conquest," "sacrifices," "rights," "command," "courage," and "fame." These are, concludes Berlin, the basic forms or ideas which all human beings must have conceived and lived by at some time or another in their history.<sup>29</sup>

In a far-reaching synthesis of Vico's *New Science*, Hayden White also considers the historical-rhetorical implications of metaphor. He observes that the stages of metaphorical development

for a culture can provide specific clues to an understanding of a nation's political consciousness. White explains that Vico's three stages of human nature, religious, heroic, and human, correspond to a "cycle" of metaphoric thought: religious, poetic, and prosaic.<sup>30</sup> This cycle of human thought, White contends, can be strong evidence to explain the type of law and reason that dominate a certain culture. In a religious society, for example, divine law and reason would slowly give way to a heroic period with an emphasis on "contractual" law and "natural" reason. The two older societies would naturally evolve into a culture dominated by "forensic" law and "civil" reasoning.<sup>31</sup>

Philosophers of language in recent years are demonstrating an interest in some of the rhetorical dimensions of the "metaphor as thought" notion originated by Vico. In 1926, the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset proclaimed that: "The metaphor is an indispensable mental tool; it is a form of scientific thought . . . Poetry is metaphor; science uses nothing more than metaphor. Also, it could be said, nothing less."<sup>32</sup>

Although Ortega's debt to Vico's *New Science* is not clearly documented, it is clear that their notions on metaphor are remarkably similar. Ortega stressed in his writings, above all, that the metaphor is the most important means for "the creation of denominations for complexes of representations, for those which adequate designations do not exist." Metaphors, therefore, are necessary for human interactions and also must "impose" themselves in everyday language.<sup>33</sup>

The philosophical implications of Vico's perspective on rhetoric and epistemology is further extended by James M. Edie's views on metaphor. He argues that since men of all historical ages have "culturally organized their experience in a distinctive manner and chosen their metaphors," they tended to think within the cultural bounds they unwittingly set up for themselves.<sup>34</sup> This means that people in a culture no longer think as they *will*, but as their linguistic and metaphorical rules say they *can*. Edie concludes, therefore, that from metaphorically derived language, cultures develop many different "linguistic world views." In order properly to analyze this unique way of ordering experience, scholars can be successful "only to the extent that it is based on the analysis of more than one and preferably several styles of linguistic expression."<sup>35</sup>

In the field of rhetorical studies specifically, several writers are



keenly aware of the suggestions Vico's *New Science* has for metaphor. While precise reference to Vico is never made, I. A. Richards' view of metaphor seems very like that of *The New Science*.<sup>36</sup> In his major work on metaphor, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Richards makes it clear that this concept is not just something "added" to language. Instead, metaphor is seen by Richards as the "omni-present principle" of all language.<sup>37</sup> "Thought," Richards concludes, "is metaphoric and proceeds by comparisons."<sup>38</sup>

Despite the theoretical similarities between Vico and Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* fails to outline the "science" of metaphor promised. Richards' failure to draw more specifically on Vico's *New Science* means that the application of a broad metaphorical perspective for rhetorical critics is not made clear.

In 1962, Michael Osborn and Douglas Ehninger attempted to systematize Richards' theory of metaphor for the study of public address.<sup>39</sup> Their discussion, however, seems especially hampered by a misunderstanding of the "romantic" view of metaphor proposed by Vico. The key questions asked by the authors at the beginning of the essay are grounded in the assumption that something is usually strategically placed in discourse. While some consideration is given to the perspective of "I. A. Richards and his followers," Osborn and Ehninger dismiss this in favor of the "classic view" of metaphor. The six hypotheses eventually presented at the end of the article do reflect a fine extension of the classical notion of metaphor. The authors, however, could have enriched their presentation had they more carefully considered Vico's perspective.

A common problem apparent in most of the writings on Vico's theory of metaphor is the authors' lack of familiarity with *The New Science*. In order for the various disciplines that are interested in Vico's theories to move into a period of constructive application, more scholars will have to understand the unique approach to rhetoric offered by *The New Science*.<sup>40</sup> A careful consideration of how Vico's "science of imagination" evolves into metaphors throughout a culture may help unify historical and philosophical perspectives on language use for a rhetorical critic.

In summary, Vico's ideas on metaphor may not necessarily revolutionize the practice of rhetorical criticism. The emphasis, however, on "thought as metaphor" would change how rhetorical critics view the relationship of rhetoric and culture in historical contexts.

The intellectual and cultural growth of a society could be studied in terms of how metaphorical images unified and explained things to the people in a culture during various phases of development. This approach, therefore, would begin to reassert the proper role of Vico's theory in the study of rhetorical interaction.

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## Notes

1. Terence Hawkes, *Metaphor* (New York: Methuen, 1972), 92.
2. Hawkes, 92.
3. Vincent M. Bevilacqua, "Vico, 'Process,' and the Nature of Rhetorical Investigation: An Epistemological Perspective," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 7 (1974): 166-74.
4. Bevilacqua, 172.
5. Bevilacqua, 171.
6. Alessandro Giuliani, "Vico's Rhetorical Philosophy and the New Rhetoric," in Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Donald P. Verene, eds., *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 31-46.
7. Giuliani, 36.
8. James L. Golden, Goodwin F. Berquist, and William E. Coleman, *The Rhetoric of Western Thought*, 3d ed. (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall-Hunt, 1983), 133-37.
9. Golden et. al., 134-35.
10. Golden et. al., 137.
11. Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 3-4.
12. Berlin, 4.
13. Berlin, 4.
14. Berlin, 11-12.
15. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, trans., *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 3.
16. *New Science*, 6.
17. *New Science*, 25.
18. *New Science*, 31 and 76-77.
19. *New Science*, 31.
20. *New Science*, 28-29.
21. *New Science*, 87.
22. Examples of these new metaphors can be found in *The New Science*, 88-89.
23. *New Science*, 32.
24. *New Science*, 90.
25. *New Science*, 104.
26. Berlin, 46.
27. Berlin, 47.
28. Berlin, 48.
29. Berlin, 48-49.
30. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 208.
31. White, 208-9.

32. As cited in Julian Marias, *José Ortega y Gasset: Circumstances and Vocation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 271.
33. See Marias, 272.
34. James M. Edie, *Speaking and Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 168.
35. Edie, 168-69.
36. See Hawkes, 57-58.
37. I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 90.
38. Richards, 94.
39. Michael M. Osborn and Douglas Ehninger, "The Metaphor in Public Address," *Speech Monographs* 29 (1962): 223-34.
40. Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 159-70.

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