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BETWEEN HISTORY AND REASON:  
GIAMBATTISTA VICO AND THE  
PROMISE OF CLASSICAL MYTH<sup>1</sup>

In terms of cultural geography, the Mediterranean basin provided the living space for the eventual emergence of a unified idea of Europe composed of plurality. The productive tension between identity and difference—a dynamic that defines Europe to this day—is perhaps most discernible in the dissemination and reception of varied myths. The confluence of Indo-European, Egyptian-Semitic, and indigenous narratives nourished the development of classical, Greco-Roman mythography, which would subsequently elicit a rich array of cultural interpretations among the region's different languages and institutions. Taken as a whole, this body of material was capable of responding to diverse religious, political, and economic contexts and thus advanced distinct literary, artistic and scientific traditions—traditions that would become increasingly differentiated in processes over the centuries.

This kind of versatility again points to a dynamic relationship between unity and multiplicity. Whereas the basic plots of “traditional tales” exhibit some constancy, each myth allows a degree of variability that corresponds to the specific circumstances of human experience within a particular time and culture.<sup>2</sup> It is through this function that myths were able to play a significant role in the formation of what would become the complex and variegated cultural landscape of Europe. Myths were constantly told and retold as people strove to comprehend life, to explain and design the world, to organize, alter, and differentiate the history not only of individual figures but also of cities, peoples, dynasties, and even humanity as a whole. Although each myth could be regarded as derived from a single question, the specific responses—the varied content, the divergent reception and conclusions—would display significant differences. The mythic system of Greco-Roman culture is thus “paradigmatic” in the sense developed by Hans Blumenberg, insofar as it posed the same questions while eliciting shifting answers.<sup>3</sup> Unity found its ground in plurality, just as plurality was grounded in unity.

This view is corroborated by Giambattista Vico who implies that, by ignoring this mutual grounding, one risks having myths devolve into absolutist,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on one chapter of my habilitation thesis (on modern transformations of classical myth) at Goethe University Frankfurt (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Graf, *Greek Mythology: An Introduction*, T. Marier, trans. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Blumenberg defines his use of the term “paradigm” in his seminal essay, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (1960), R. Savage, trans. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010). This usage goes on to inform his major study, *Work on Myth* (1979), R. M. Wallace, trans. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).

hyper-rationalized ideology. Absolutism—and for Vico, pure rationalism is but a species of absolutism—entails a single, definitive answer to a single question. In this sense, absolutes counter mythic variability and difference. For Vico, unlike rational precepts and their universalist claims, myths are thoroughly historical: “The nature of things [human or historical institutions] is nothing other than their coming into existence [*nascimento di esse*] at certain times and under certain conditions.”<sup>4</sup> In order to appreciate the true value of this historical difference, Vico recommends the study of philology, which should serve as a corrective to the ahistorical approach inherent to Cartesian rationalism.

Although little regarded in his own day, Vico’s reflections spelled out a comprehensive understanding of myth’s significance as a source of knowledge about human existence. Yet it would take some time before his contribution to mythological theory would be recognized among Europe’s intelligentsia.<sup>5</sup> In the German-speaking world, he was acknowledged only fleetingly by Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder, who would inspire young Goethe’s interest. Only in the early 19th century was it discovered that Vico had anticipated what then seemed to be revolutionary and controversial theories, for example, Friedrich August Wolf’s reflections on Homeric epic and Barthold Georg Niebuhr’s formulation of early Roman history.<sup>6</sup> Later in the century, an increasing number of European intellectuals at last began to take a deeper interest in Vico, above all for his view that man is himself author of his own history and that history began with myths as a structure of early language and polytheistic religion, which developed in a cyclical cultural process.<sup>7</sup> One was fascinated not least with the idea of myths as a testimony to concrete thought and the conviction that an age of myth was a necessary intellectual phase of development in human history. Ernst Cassirer, for instance, who regarded mythical thought and perception as the essential symbolic form from which all others emerge and who stressed the affective and emotional aspects of mythical perception, read Vico while still a student, an experience that he claimed to be the inspiration for his life’s devotion to myth and other “symbolic forms” (e.g., language, religion, and art).<sup>8</sup> Today, Vico’s view of humankind as active in history and culture is seen to herald the early modern emergence of cultural studies as a discipline. Nor can the importance of his thought be overstated as a cornerstone of the theoretical development of religious studies as a discipline distinct from

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<sup>4</sup> Giambattista Vico, *New Science: Principles of the New Science concerning the Common Nature of Nations*, Third Edition, D. Marsh, trans. (New York: Penguin, 1999), 81 (translation modified). Subsequent citations from this edition will be marked NS with page number.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Vittorio Hösle’s introduction to the German translation of Vico’s *New Science*: “Vico und die Idee der Kulturwissenschaft. Genese, Themen und Wirkungsgeschichte der ‘Scienza nuova,’” in Giambattista Vico, *Prinzipien einer neuen Wissenschaft über die gemeinsame Natur der Völker*, Vol. 1 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990), xxxi – cclxxvii, especially the section “Stichworte zur Wirkungsgeschichte Vicos,” cclxiv – cclxxvii.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Peter Burke, *Vico* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4 – 5, 89 – 91.

<sup>7</sup> On the “echo of Vico in Germany” see also Giuseppe Cacciari, *Vico in Italia e in Germania: letture e prospettive*, *Atti del convegno internazionale, Napoli, 1-3 marzo* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1993); and Stefanie Woidich, “Zur Geschichte der hermeneutischen Vico-Rezeption,” in *Vico und die Hermeneutik: Eine rezeptionsgeschichtliche Annäherung* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2007), 147 – 225, 245 – 319.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Zweiter Teil: Das mythische Denken*, 9th edition, (Darmstadt: Primus, 1997); and Woidich, *Vico und die Hermeneutik*, 179 – 197.

theology. Crucial to this development was the early modern analysis of religion as an imaginative construct, which Vico employed in relation to ancient texts, in particular the early Greek epics.

The present paper turns to Vico specifically in order to examine the primary tension between rational identity and historical difference within the European tradition. In this way, I want to establish Vico's usefulness for a reconsideration of mythic, religious and even national pluralism. Upon adumbrating my own theoretical position towards a "mythic paradigm," which I develop in line with and in response to the work of Hans Blumenberg (§1), I turn to the key distinction that Vico makes between the natural sciences, which are grounded in the rationalism of the cogito, and the social sciences, which posit constructivist arguments that depend on human sensibility (§2). Subsequently, I investigate Vico's refusal to subordinate *mythos* to hegemonic *logos* (§3), before concluding with some brief reflections on the epistemological and hermeneutic stakes implied by Vico's demonstrations (§4). Rather than provide any comprehensive or exhaustive account, I take a more desultory approach that should amply exhibit how Vico's work can counter propagandist appropriations of mythic and religious material.

## 1. THE MYTHIC PARADIGM

The mythological system of identity and difference that constitutes the idea of Europe has always depended on an oscillation between continuity and discontinuity. On the one hand, myths are continuous in that their core elements persist with some measure of recognizability. On the other hand, this persistence remains possible only by means of their susceptibility to variation and consequent adaptability. Myths continue to matter only when they respond to changing circumstances, which thereby introduce an element of discontinuity. The continuum that we call tradition is constructed by these interventions. In a vital manner, the historical interventions, interruptions or breaks in the tradition constitute the tradition itself. Discontinuity is the proof of a surviving continuity.

As Aristotle argued in his *Poetics*, it is not right for the poet to change the myth's central plot, yet this should not preclude poetic innovation. Indeed, the poet "must invent and make a skillful use of tradition" (αὐτὸν δὲ εὕρισκεν δεῖ καὶ τοῖς παραδεδομένοις χρῆσθαι καλῶς, 1453b25). Tradition is a gift, something that has been given over (παραδεδομένον), which implies that the mythographer is thus obliged to give something back. I take this notion of gift to be a crucial component of Blumenberg's indebtedness to Vico, precisely when Blumenberg defines myths as "stories that are distinguished by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core and by an equally pronounced capacity for marginal variation." As Blumenberg goes on to clarify, myths are "not like 'holy texts,' which cannot be altered by one iota." They are not, then, confessions of faith or equivalents to the revelations of the book religions, but rather stories "whose variability produces the attraction of trying out new and personal means of presenting them" and whose variability makes them applicable to ever new situations.<sup>9</sup> In my view, it is of

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<sup>9</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 34. On Blumenberg's relation to Vico, see Samuel Moyn, "Metaphorically Speaking: Hans Blumenberg, Giambattista Vico, and the Problem of Origins," *Qui parle* 12 (2000), 55 - 76.

great importance throughout European cultural history that the same stories have continually engendered new guiding principles and identity profiles – cultural, religious, and ethical, but also national. For they deal not only with the genesis of the world and the gods, but also, and in particular, with fundamentally human situations: for example, stories about what it means to love or hate a country, a city, or another human being, about fearing a deity, honoring friendship, dying for a principle, exercising power, resisting tyranny, inciting revolution, praying and pleading, guarding conventional laws or boldly transgressing them.

For Blumenberg, the primary target of mythic narration is the presumably sovereign power that he consistently characterizes as the “absolutism of reality.” This power is at first perceived as absolutist insofar as it appears to suffer no contingencies or tolerate any negotiations.<sup>10</sup> Absolutist positions exclude difference and thereby threaten to overpower mankind. However, in forging a representation of this trans-individual power, myths limit its reach. Indeed, “the work on myth” is simply a response to this dreaded absolutism. For example, by creating the figure of Zeus, by implicating the god in any number of compromising narratives, myth not only personifies a force otherwise unrepresentable, it also prepares the ground for negotiating with that power, for example, by ritual, prayer, or sacrifice. Inscribed now within a polytheistic pantheon, the god’s power is further limited by other gods. Mankind is thus granted the opportunity to play one against the other.<sup>11</sup> Plurality impoverishes the absolute. Myth humanizes.

The great versatility and cultural fecundity of myth motivated the cultural diversity of antiquity, which would continue to unfold during the long period of Christianization. Engaged from the start with “concurrent alternatives,”<sup>12</sup> Christianity contributed to the growth of Europe precisely as a myth-like process of exchange among traditions from different religions and other meaningful institutions. The same even holds true for the varied system of the natural sciences, at least in terms of their origins. Looking back to antiquity, it can be seen that these disciplines arose among the natural or “Pre-Socratic” philosophers, who derived their concepts from the early cosmological stories and images that described our world. These conceptual clusters were first given literary form in the image-rich poetry of Homer and Hesiod. As in the epic stories, the theories of the early Greek thinkers were founded in the “philosophical problem in which,” to quote Karl Popper, “all thinking men are interested: the problem of understanding the world in which we live; and thus ourselves (who are part of that world) and our knowledge of it.”<sup>13</sup>

In calling into question traditional conceptions of the nature of knowledge, Vico was the first to draw a clear distinction between the natural and the social sciences. On the one hand, the natural sciences are oriented outwardly by the relatively changeless nature of the physical world; while the social sciences, on the other hand, are directed inwardly, concerned with the development of human society. The latter reflected Vico’s stand against the

<sup>10</sup> Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> See Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> For more detail on the term “concurrent alternatives” (*mitlaufende Alternative*), see Burkhard Gladigow, “Europäische Religionsgeschichte,” in *Lokale Religionsgeschichte*, H.G. Kippenberg and B. Luchesi, ed. (Marburg: Diagonal, 1995), 21 – 42.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Popper, “Back to the Presocratics” (1958), in Popper, *The World of Parmenides* (London: Routledge, 1998), 7 – 33, here 7.

rationalism of René Descartes, who sponsored a scientific-analytical method that neglected national-cultural difference. According to Vico's German translator Erich Auerbach,<sup>14</sup> he was already setting out an "anti-Cartesian" line in the slim volume *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia ex lingua eruenda* (1710), which criticizes the notion of the *cogito* with the objection that nothing can be knowable except what one has made oneself. This simple criterion became the major tenet of his philosophy, which insists on the distinction between God and humanity. For Vico, the human subject can contemplate things (*cogitare*) and come to partial understanding, but a more complete *intelligere* in the sense of a divinely perfect knowledge and insight is beyond him.<sup>15</sup> Vico regards acceptance of this insight as crucial for mankind, for it specifies that the realm accessible to human understanding is emphatically limited to the *historical* world.

## 2. THE 'POETIC WISDOM' OF THE ANCIENTS

Vico's insistence on setting limits to human understanding motivated his characteristic critique of philosophical rationalism, whose one-sided emphasis on the reflective intellect he sought to temper with knowledge gained from sensual experience. Here he was already speaking out against the "empty and arrogant sophistry that proves everything and knows nothing."<sup>16</sup> His objections also extended to the practical consequences of rationalism in education: Imagination and memory, he argued, were the primal expression of human gifts. They warranted cultivation, for upon them was founded the *sensus communis*, the capacity to grasp and formulate multiplicities. The "nature or birth" (*natura o nascimento*) of each "nation" has its cause in this original capacity.<sup>17</sup>

This fundamental idea infuses Vico's masterpiece, the *Scienza Nuova* (first edition 1725),<sup>18</sup> in which he compiles and further expands everything he had developed in his earlier writings. However misunderstood and decried as an irrational and speculative *stravagante* the work was during his lifetime, with the *New Science* Vico nonetheless stands as one of the founders of modern cultural studies.<sup>19</sup> This assessment is due in no small part to Auerbach himself, who came to Vico through his studies with Ernst Troeltsch. Troeltsch's wide-ranging work encompassed theology and philosophy, cultural history and politics, and itself forms an important cornerstone of

<sup>14</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 433. In his foreword to the *New Science*, Auerbach writes: "It is out of his opposition to Descartes that Vico became the figure who stands before us today" (20). For an overview of Vico's work in contrast to Cartesian epistemology, see Auerbach's essay, "Vico's Contribution to Literary Criticism" (1958), in *Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach: Time, History, and Literature*, Jane O. Newman, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 3 – 10.

<sup>15</sup> For more details, see Woidich, *Vico und die Hermeneutik*, 48 – 67 ("De antiquissima Italorum sapientia (1710) – Vicos Metaphysik der menschlichen Schwäche").

<sup>16</sup> From Erich Auerbach's foreword to his translation of the *New Science*, *Die neue Wissenschaft über die gemeinschaftliche Natur der Völker* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition: Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000), 9 – 39, here 20.

<sup>17</sup> Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, T. Goddard Bergin and M. H. Fisch, trans. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1948), 64.

<sup>18</sup> Original title: *Principi di una scienza nuova d'intorno alla communa natura delle nazioni*, English *Principles of a New Science concerning the Common Nature of Nations*.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Hölsle, "Vico und die Idee der Kulturwissenschaft," cclxxvi – vii.

modern cultural science. For Troeltsch, Vico, was the first to have conceived of a modern, secular theory of culture, thus anticipating 19th-century theories. Auerbach's translation of selections from the *Scienza Nuova*, made in this spirit, was a decisive stimulus in promoting discussion across a wide spectrum of disciplines throughout the German-speaking world. Here Vico proposes an epistemology based on the axiom that all true knowledge is knowledge of causes and that it can only be acquired from those objects and facts created by men themselves: the true (*verum*) is measured according to the made (*factum*).<sup>20</sup> According to Vico, this "truth" is found in the historical world (in the broadest sense) and can be ascertained only by constructive argument. We find it in the human world of institutions, in myths and fables, in language, in laws. In the most general terms, we find it in culture and civilization, in the *mondo civile*. Physical nature, meanwhile, which for Vico constitutes the less readily comprehensible half of reality, is ultimately not accessible to us as *verum*, because the human knowledge of truth is only possible in reference to the history made by man, and not to nature, which is ahistorical, made by God and thus ineffable. The hybris of rationalism consists in nothing less than the claim to comprehend the divinely incomprehensible nature of the world.

Accordingly, Vico finds truth and poetic wisdom in the earliest human mytho-poetic inventions. He does not regard the ages in which such wisdom arose as some primeval condition of paradise but rather as a vibrant state of intellectual and societal productivity in which the imagination was a fundamental social organ, lending sensual and concrete form to particular ideas. "Poetic wisdom, the first wisdom of the gentile world, must have begun with a metaphysic not rational and abstract like that of learned men now, but felt and imagined [...]" (NS 104). The persistent emphasis on feeling and imagination directly criticizes rationalism as distant or transcendent to the world and thereby anticipates Dilthey's critique of any theoretical attitude that ignores history or cultural "significance." In Vico's view, the myths emerged without "ratiocination" (NS 104), and so were not fictitious stories *about* the world, but a mode of understanding and ordering *in* the world, something that came naturally to early man who, being "ignorant of everything," found "everything wonderful" (NS 104). Myths were the result of the "robust sense and vigorous imagination" of their "makers," the first "poets": a product of a "wholly corporeal imagination," which, being "quite corporeal," was of a uniquely "marvelous sublimity" (NS 105). Moreover, according to Vico, these myths possessed a religious character and were at the same time models for social conduct. They align with the three institutions of religion, burial, and marriage that are found among all peoples

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<sup>20</sup> On the *verum-factum* principle in Vico, see Karl Löwith, "Vicos Grundsatz 'verum et factum convertuntur'" in Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 9: *Gott, Mensch und Welt in der Philosophie der Neuzeit – G. B. Vico – Paul Valéry* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986), 195 – 227; Höhle, "Vico und die Idee der Kulturwissenschaft," lxx – xxi; Eric Voegelin, *Giambattista Vico – La scienza Nuova*. in Voegelin, *Collected Works (History of Political Ideas*, vol. VI), B. Cooper, ed. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 82 – 149; and Woidich, *Vico und die Hermeneutik*, 58 – 67. The *verum-factum* hypothesis, of course, has played a fundamental role in Hayden White's seminal reconfiguration of historiography in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 408 – 18 et passim. See also White's brief essay, "Vico and Structuralist/Poststructuralist Thought" in *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature and Theory, 1957 – 2007* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 203 – 07.

and are to be understood as concrete analogies to the three metaphysical ideas of God, immortality, and freedom – the three “postulates,” incidentally, that Kant would identify in his *Critique of Practical Reason*.

This regard for myths is also evident by the fact that Vico – for all his doubts still a Christian and convinced of the special status of so-called “Judeo-Christian” history – makes no *methodological* disparagement of pagan history in light of Biblical history. He nowhere subordinates any other religions to his own “true” religion; rather, as Karl Löwith states, he treats them “on an equal footing.”<sup>21</sup> In this respect Vico departs, for instance, from those Christian patristic authors like Clement of Alexandria and Augustine who discount ancient myths as inventions, as fables devoid of any truth. Even if in a false sense, Vico rightly sees Jupiter, god of the sky, thunder, and lightning, “king and father of men and gods” (NS 106), as a *deus optimus maximus* comparable to the genuine God of the Christians (NS 105 – 06, 108 – 10). For the motto of the first edition of his *Scienza Nuova*, he quotes from Virgil’s Third *Eclogue*: *A Jove principium musae* (“The beginning of the Muse is from Jove,” v. 60, NS 42; see also 110 and 216).

Palpable behind Vico’s quite unapologetic attitude is the idea that all four of the “main religions” (Judaism, Christianity, Paganism, and Islam) “believe in a provident divinity” (NS 86); and that these institutions are bound together by the all-encompassing providence of historical phases of development.<sup>22</sup> According to Vico, Jupiter expresses the religious wisdom of all pagan peoples in imaginative reaction to thunder and lightning. People interpreted these phenomena as signs of a supernatural power that they called Jupiter, of whom “all things were full” (*Jovis omnia plena*; NS 106). This understanding of the divine developed according to their ability to comprehend providence, which “permitted them to be deceived into fearing the false divinity of Jove” (NS 108). As Vico argues, before providence manifested itself in the self-sacrificing love of Christ and then in the Christian dogma, it had to appear to the pagans as thunder and lightning, as a catalyst of fear and terror intended to bring humankind to culture. The frightening experience led mankind to stabilize instincts and order life by means of religion, laws, and myth (i.e., as the language by which man overcame his alienation within the world).<sup>23</sup> Blumenberg’s concept of the depletion of absolutist power has its source here.

Vico accords a key role in this process to humankind’s fear of autonomous gods. The power of providence, he says, awoke in man an “idea of divinity, which they in their ignorance attributed to that to which it did not belong,” and *ob terrorem* – “through the terror of this imagined divinity,” which in fact was fear of themselves – they began “to put themselves in some order” (NS 63). Vico takes the names and genealogies of gods as examples of this. He sees a connection between naming and fear, a view that would be expounded in a similar way by Blumenberg’s *Work on Myth*. Blumenberg argues that the

<sup>21</sup> Karl Löwith, “Vico,” in Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen. Die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie* (1953; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1967), 109 – 28, here 121.

<sup>22</sup> Few of Vico’s ideas and theories have proved as controversial as his doctrine of providence. See Maeve Edith Albano, *Vico and Providence* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Luc Brisson and Christoph Jamme, *Einführung in die Philosophie des Mythos*, Vol. 2: *Neuzeit und Gegenwart* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991), 12 – 15.

original rationality of myth deflects *terror* by relating stories about it, by affording an initial distancing.<sup>24</sup> Similar to Hermann Usener's work in *Götternamen: Versuch einer Lehre von der Religiösen Begriffsbildung* (1896), both Vico and Blumenberg regard naming as a step towards comprehension. Here, as for Usener and Blumenberg, the name allows the god to be addressed. It transforms an objectless anxiety into an objectified and therefore approachable fear. Precisely by personifying power, by turning it into an addressee, forces of nature can be persuaded, which already points to a limitation of power. Besides stories of the gods, Vico's view also includes mankind's attempt to understand the language and the will of the fear-inducing gods by interpreting signs through auspices, oracles, and sibyls (NS 62). By this approach, Vico seeks to affirm several theories, and two in particular: firstly, that "the world of peoples began everywhere with religion"; and secondly, that the origin of all human science lies in the signs of that beginning (naming of gods; attempts to understand their workings; NS 62). It was from such activity of reading signs that, according to Vico, astrology and astronomy were first born, which subsequently gave rise to mathematics and geometry. Even jurisprudence, he argues, arises from the auspices, held in order to receive divine laws that could then be interpreted.

An allegorical depiction in the 1744 edition of Vico's *New Science* elucidates these fundamental ideas by illustrating the important function of divine providence, whose sway is regarded as the determining cause of the course of history.<sup>25</sup> Here, a ray of providence links the eye of God with the heart of Metaphysics (represented by a woman looking up at God from her vantage point standing on the celestial globe, i.e. the physical world). A second ray emanates from her to strike a statue of Homer, representing the historical world of the pagans, but the ray bypasses Nature. According to Vico's commentary in his introduction, the frontispiece denotes among other things that Metaphysics contemplates God "above the order of natural things" in which the philosophers have hitherto contemplated Him, and that true philosophy sees in God the world of the human mind, in order to prove his providence in the world, in the civil world of peoples (NS 3). This philosophy includes the age of antiquity and its myths. Moreover, it implies that the oldest, pagan wisdom imparted by Homer demands our attention in its own right. Isaiah Berlin, in considering this view of different epochs as being on an equal footing, calls Vico "the true father of historicism, of the sociology of culture, of the notion of the validity of each form of art or culture for its own time."<sup>26</sup> With Vico, we stumble across an anticipation of the famous dictum of Leopold von Ranke, that "every epoch is immediate to God." If each epoch were nothing but a "stepping-stone for the following generation," it would amount to an "injustice on the part of the deity."<sup>27</sup> Historical justice, though,

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<sup>24</sup> Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 34 – 58 et passim. See also Blumenberg's contribution in *Terror und Spiel. Probleme der Mythenrezeption*, Manfred Fuhrmann, ed. (Munich: Fink, 1971), 579 – 91, here 585.

<sup>25</sup> Note to the Frontispiece of the *New Science* (NS 2).

<sup>26</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "One of the Boldest Innovators in the History of Human Thought," in Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, H. Hardy, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 53 – 67 (first published in *The New York Times Magazine*, 23 November 1979, 75 – 100).

<sup>27</sup> Leopold von Ranke, "On Progress in History (From the first lecture to King Maximilian II of Bavaria 'On the Epochs of Modern History,' 1854)," in Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, G.G. Iggers and K. von Moltke, ed. (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 20 – 25, here 21. – On Ranke, see also Thomas Gil, "Leopold Ranke," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*, A. Tucker, ed. (Oxford:



was Vico's very concern. To him, each culture spoke with its own voice. As Herder would later acknowledge, Vico saw in the myths of antiquity the embodiment of nationally distinct world-views just as authentic as that of Greek philosophy, Roman law, or the poetry of his own, enlightened age. Although Vico's concept of distinct nationality may be said to anticipate Romantic and post-Romantic mytho-poiesis, which is motivated by state-driven, exclusionary ideologies, it also and more crucially furnishes the basis for a radical critique of these constructed foundations and thereby prepares the ground for a more pluralist account of nationhood.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. EQUAL STATUS OF CULTURES

The idea of the equal status of cultures also defuses the traditional opposition between *mythos* and *logos*. This opposition, first expressed by Pindar,<sup>29</sup> has been noted by many scholars since antiquity.<sup>30</sup> Vico too sees a growth through the course of history towards the capacity for "criticism" (NS 150) and true (i.e., sensually informed) rationality. From an archaic epoch of concrete mythical thought, he says, a phase of consciousness bound to symbols led to the emergence of rational man's power of reflection and capacity for abstraction. However, it does not follow from this that truth is only to be found through rational abstraction. On the contrary, truth and wisdom, for Vico, are already found in the first, mythical poetry. In the Homeric epics, unsurpassed masterpieces were created that followed the "poetic logic" (NS 114 - 51) of the people of that age, in their primitive, concrete, anthropomorphic way of thinking.

Vico explains the behavior of the Homeric gods and heroes, which sometimes appears strange to us, with the dictum "other times, other

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Blackwell, 2009), 383 - 93, esp. 385.

<sup>28</sup> On Vico as a "harbinger" of later developments in national mythmaking, see Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, Scholarship* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 50 - 54.

<sup>29</sup> Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 1.28b-29. Anthony Verity, *Pindar: The Complete Odes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>30</sup> Contrary to the long-established belief that Greek thought developed from the sphere of *mythos* towards that of *logos*, it is now increasingly accepted that the two spheres were mutually dependent, and that to some extent a development in the opposite direction may even sometimes be observable. On the relation between *mythos* and *logos*, a good many works have appeared over the past two decades, partly as critical responses to Wilhelm Nestle's book *Vom Mythos zum Logos* (1940) and in turn in answer to these responses. See, e.g., Jean-Pierre Vernant, "The Reason of Myth," in *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 203 - 60; Christoph Jamme, 'Gott an hat ein Gewand': *Grenzen und Perspektiven philosophischer Mythos-Theorien der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991); Ingo W. Rath, *Die verkannte mythische Vernunft: Perspektiven einer vernünftigen Alternative* (Vienna: Passagen, 1992); Heinz-Günther Nesselrath, "Mythos - Logos - Mytho-logos: Zum Mythos-Begriff der Griechen und ihrem Umgang mit ihm," in *Form und Funktion des Mythos in archaischen und modernen Gesellschaften*, P. Rusterholz and R. Moser, ed. (Stuttgart: P. Haupt, 1999), 1 - 26; Glenn W. Most, "From Logos to Mythos," in Richard Buxton, ed., *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Volker Steenblock, *Arbeit am Logos: Aufstieg und Krise der wissenschaftlichen Vernunft* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2000); Giotto Valzania, *Der Mythos des Logos und der Logos des Mythos* (Düsseldorf: Parerga, 2001); and Gerhard Stapelfeldt, *Mythos und Logos. Antike Philosophie von Homer bis Sokrates* (Hamburg: Kováč, 2007).

customs." They were "wild and savage natures" (NS 89) that expressed their view of the world with "vast imaginations" (NS 115). Their "minds were not in the least abstract, refined, or spiritualized," but "entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, buried in the body" (NS 106). Hence, they were not able to form abstract class-concepts, but only imaginative ones, deriving from these "poetic characters [*caratteri poeti*]" – as from "ideal portraits" – "all the particular species which resembled them" (NS 66 – 67). According to Vico's view, Heracles fulfills the type of the poetic character *par excellence*, since just as each of the pagan peoples had its Jupiter, so also "every gentile nation had its Hercules" (NS 65). The poetic characters of tribal progenitors like Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, and Romulus were equated with him.<sup>31</sup> In Greek epic, Achilles as a poetic class-concept embodies the quality of "valor" that is "common to all strong men," while Ulysses represents "an idea of prudence common to all wise men" (NS 115). For Vico, even Homer himself is not a historical personage, but an idea or a poetic character, and his work a collective product of the Greek peoples. Myths, it would appear, not only create the world of sense (*factum = verum*), they also create the "people." Conceptual thinking would seem incapable of doing so (NS 269 – 300).

Vico discusses the tendency among the first people to create poetic characters by their inability to conceive of abstractions, the consequence of which is the highly sensual and inimitable "poetic" language of epic.<sup>32</sup> However brutal these people may have been, he argues, their "wild and savage comparisons," "cruel and fearful descriptions of battles and deaths," and "sentences filled with sublime passions," were of a nobility, a "clarity and splendor of style" inaccessible to philosophy, criticism, and the more refined art of poetry of later ages (NS 292). For all their other advantages over that harsh and cruel "heroic" society (NS 276 – 77), later societies produced no art greater than the Homeric. Vico's aesthetic verdict here also implies a metaphysical reassessment of poetry. The expressiveness developed by these early "savages" to explain the world and to talk of confrontations and institutions, he argues, corresponded to divine providence. The world first had to be invented in the mytho-poetic sphere before it could be contemplated by reason in the abstract, before it could be expressed conceptually in the critical reflection that founds the modern State.

Vico did not deny that the detailed design of mythical narratives had become obsolete, especially insofar as they concerned the reality available to the senses and its specific metaphysics. Furthermore, he held no doubt that Christ had taken the place of Jupiter. All these processes he acknowledged as irreversible steps towards rationality, and away from savagery towards the

<sup>31</sup> Cf. the summary in Vico, *Die neue Wissenschaft* (Auerbach), 73.

<sup>32</sup> In Vico's opinion, the "poetic" language of these early people was not an allegorical and unreal speech, whose "real" meaning needs to be deduced, but a directly sensual language that was not yet capable of forming abstract terms, so that, for instance, instead of speaking of anger, it would be necessary to say that one's blood was boiling. Unable to distinguish between qualities and those bearing them, they would have identified them with all people and things in which they occurred to a particular degree. The poetic characters, therefore, are general terms for things that in reality are different, but identical in the "idea" lying behind them. – For more detail, including the theory of language and Vico's idea of the "*caratteri poeti*," see e.g. Eugenio Coseriu, "Von den 'universali fantastici,'" in Jürgen Trabant, ed., *Vico und die Zeichen. Vico e i segni* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1995), 73 – 78; and Hösle, "Vico und die Idee der Kulturwissenschaft," clxxix – xxxvi.

civilization of later times or, if one prefers, towards the *logos*. This seems to permit the narrowing of Vico's theory to the partial view that the stories of gods and heroes, demons and monsters, handed down to us by the early literary and figurative documents of the Greeks, belong to a human phase of infancy that is irretrievably past and gone, and that these stories no longer have any place in our modern culture and civilization. Yet such a view is challenged not only by Vico's equal regard for all periods of history, but also by his doctrine that allows history no teleological course striving towards a pinnacle of achievement. Instead, Vico sees this pinnacle already achieved at the outset with the invention of the world in mytho-poetic terms as a great, enlivened cosmos. A pinnacle of this kind, according to his view, cannot simply be past and gone. Moreover, the persistence of the myths should not be disregarded, as it is evidenced in their continuing validity throughout the different ages and cultures that have received them for their own purposes and for the sake of their own statements, a process that continues to this day. The old stories are as it were intermingled in our world. Inter- as well as intra-national difference persists as a substrate to State identities, just as *mythos* continues to inform *logos*. As Blumenberg shows in *Work on Myth*, myths are an indissoluble part of European culture. In all the strangeness and otherness that they bring with them (as Jean-Pierre Vernant, among others, never tires of emphasizing<sup>33</sup>), myths remain a challenge to comprehend and cannot be ascribed dismissively to some prehistoric or pre-logical phase. These stories, in which people gave concrete form to their beliefs, their wishes, hopes, and fears, their doubts and decisions, principles and fantasies, perspectives and readings, have ultimately shown themselves to be fundamentally indestructible, in spite of all the transformations of earlier versions and corrective interventions in the traditional narratives. Their vitality, which we experience as the challenging "presentness of myth" (Kolakowski), was and is irrepressible in its continuous play of repetition, reinterpretation, and redeployment. The myths of Homer and the first poets, as Vico reminds us, were already appropriating indirectly and disruptively what were "at first true histories" (NS 277), for they dealt with the events, circumstances, and problems of concern to people, even if the details of their origins and transmission have been lost or their content diluted. Their timeless reputation and importance to people comes from the fact that they are about people, people's experiences and actions, about all that to which we, as Vico would put it, have direct access as people.

Because of this access, myths open us to discoveries quite different from those available through the observation of the external world, which primarily affords us an understanding of what is happening and how. Myths help us to understand ourselves, to understand what it means to be a human being, with everything that being human entails. They harbor a store of vital perspectives, emotional worlds, experiences, needs, and explanatory propositions that evidently lie beyond the power of an overarching monotheistic religion, empirical science and political structures. They have been made obsolete neither by Christianity and its Bible, nor by the modern natural sciences, whose foundations Vico attributed to Descartes, nor indeed by the philosophical tradition that dates back to the dawn of European culture. Vico sees a world-view embodied in the ancient myths that is just as authentic as those three (philosophy, Christianity, natural sciences), and as

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. e.g. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 111 - 12.

Roman law and the poetry of his own, enlightened age. This judgment makes him an extraordinary thinker in the context of his own day so dominated by rationalism. To a large degree, he took up the cudgels on behalf of myth as the key to understanding human existence. Thus, he comes across as a figure of orientation not only in cultural and religious studies, but also in classical studies and mythological scholarship.

Admittedly, it is doubtful whether the potential for revelation still inherent in the ancient myths for us today is really being recognized and used in a coherent way for self-reflection in society and by those who are “playing” with mythology. It is also beyond dispute that myths are constantly misused for the purposes of legitimizing personal claims to power and assertion. But it is to Vico’s enduring credit that he allowed all epochs and cultures an equal status, that he took a stand against the idea of timeless or absolute truths and continuous progress, and that he asserted the uniqueness of every culture with its particular conventions and customs, languages and forms of speech, legal texts and poems. With his insight that the early Greek stories of gods and heroes were of historical importance as expressions of an incipient poetic consciousness, and with his view that those stories gave concrete narrative form to abstract ideas and afforded us an understanding of the world-view of the people who created them, he ensured the survival of the myths through the Enlightenment, when they were generally regarded as testimony to a primitive stage of superstitious irrationality.<sup>34</sup> Vico granted the myths a special status, not least in regard to philosophical discourse. He thus took the then ubiquitous “precedence of theoretical knowledge over the mythical narratives,” as formulated by Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, and “stood it on its head.” “Philosophy for him [Vico] is always a late and subordinate form of knowledge that interprets the original stories.”<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. HERMENEUTICS AND/OR DISTANCED UNDERSTANDING

In exposing the deficiencies of a purely rationalistic approach to culture – an exposure wholly grounded in his theory of myth – Vico made a vital contribution to debates that would emerge only centuries later. Since the 19th century, there has been much deliberation as to whether it is possible to attain an understanding of these original stories in their sensual language, so rich in imagery. Wilhelm Dilthey saw the *Scienza Nuova* as an important milestone in the foundation of hermeneutics, and partly for this reason his writings turn frequently to Vico.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, Dilthey’s proposition of “*Hineinversetzen, Nachbilden, Nacherleben*”<sup>37</sup> (“Empathize, Emulate, Relive”) came to be associated with Vico’s concept of understanding through which he described the approach to the conceptual world of early humankind. Erich Auerbach, for instance, refers to “the jointly-human imaged by Vico, by

<sup>34</sup> Heinz Gockel, *Mythos und Poesie. Zum Mythosbegriff in Aufklärung und Frühromantik*, (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1981), 89.

<sup>35</sup> Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, “Nachwort,” in Vico, *Die neue Wissenschaft* (Auerbach), 445 – 77, here 475.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Woidich, *Vico und die Hermeneutik*, 164 – 79.

<sup>37</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, “Die höheren Formen des Verstehens” and “*Hineinversetzen, Nachbilden, Nacherleben*,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, B. Groethuysen et al., ed. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1922ff.), vol. 7: *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt der Geisteswissenschaften* (1992), 210 – 13 and 213 – 16.

virtue of which we can understand history [...] from the inside out".<sup>38</sup> Isaiah Berlin talks of the "'inside' point of view" Vico sought to advocate through his "New Science," "that of a participant not an observer," whose task is "the 'entering' by means of *fantasia*—imagination—into the minds of men remote from one's own society in space or time."<sup>39</sup> Recently, however, it has been argued that Vico had no such "empathy" with the past in mind. Vittorio Hösle and Stefanie Woidich, for instance, reading Vico on the possibility of entering into the thought and conceptual world of the early authors of myth, certainly do not infer that the thought of those authors can be "imagined" ("*immaginar*") through "*fantasia*," but rather contend that it might be possible, albeit with difficulty, to "understand" ("*intender*") it by blending "metaphysical insight and personal experience."<sup>40</sup> For example, because we know fear, we know that those people would also have felt it, and, being sensually and passionately immediate, would have done so in a particularly pronounced, "archaic" way. We can understand this in an abstract way, but we cannot feel the extent of their fear.<sup>41</sup>

It seems to me that a continuation of this discussion would be exceedingly productive. However, there is only very limited scope for this here, and the story of Vico's integration into the discourse of hermeneutics in the 20th century (Dilthey, Cassirer, Auerbach, Emilio Betti, Gadamer, Habermas, Apel) has already been described in detail elsewhere.<sup>42</sup> The question of proper understanding in dealing with the ancients, with their narratives and their connections with the tradition, with neologisms and counter-proposals, remains open. It is clearly demonstrated, in my opinion, that "understanding" as Werner Hamacher formulates it in *Entferntes Verstehen* ("Distanced Understanding"), "can never be a passive absorption into a vessel of concepts or expectations."<sup>43</sup> Indeed "understanding," as Hamacher asserts *contra* Dilthey,<sup>44</sup> cannot be explained as the simple "narcissistic 'rediscovery of the I in the Thou,'" but proves to be a "'rediscovery' of what has never been before."<sup>45</sup> This apparent paradox gives expression to the productive side of the reception process of redesigning both the traditional myth and the issues of life the myth explores. The breathtaking diversity of interpretations, of re-readings and new readings of myths, shows that they resist an "understanding" in the sense of rationalization. Because of their variability and adaptability, the myths have ultimately evaded persistent attempts to appropriate them and reduce them to a single meaning. They sustain themselves on ever-new situations – not as meanings indissolubly or absolutely fixed, but as formations sufficiently imprecise and vague to remain open to shifting meanings.

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<sup>38</sup> Auerbach, "Vorrede," 27.

<sup>39</sup> Berlin, "One of the Boldest Innovators in the History of Human Thought." See also Berlin, "A Note on Vico's Concept of Knowledge," in *Giambattista Vico. An international Symposium*, G. Tagliacozzo and H. White, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 371 – 78, esp. 375.

<sup>40</sup> Hösle, "Vico und die Idee der Kulturwissenschaft," clv – clix; and Woidich, *Vico und die Hermeneutik*, 120 – 21.

<sup>41</sup> Hösle, "Vico und die Idee der Kulturwissenschaft," clvii.

<sup>42</sup> Woidich, *Vico und die Hermeneutik*.

<sup>43</sup> Werner Hamacher, *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 21.

<sup>44</sup> Hamacher, *Premises*, 21 – 24.

<sup>45</sup> Hamacher, *Premises*, 24.

This is the explicit message of Vico's anti-Cartesian proposal that doing precedes comprehending, that language disrupts rational understanding. Not only does the Vichian opposition to rationalism and reason's claim to hegemony bring wide-ranging consequences for hermeneutics, not only does it privilege philology over rationalist philosophy (*philosophia rationalis*), but it also suggests an understanding of myth that would prohibit accounting for its figures and events according to the logic of unambiguous concepts and discrediting the entire intermediate zone of the conceptually indefinite. Such an understanding is to a high degree sustained by the insight that the much-discussed "universality" of myth is not a logical generality, and that myth is a form of articulation lacking in logical distinctions, while at the same time being indispensable to the development of such distinctions. Hence the attempt to set up *mythos* and *logos* as sharply defined polar opposites is as otiose as it is misleading.

This assertion and the issues of life contained in the "poetic wisdom" of the ancients by virtue of their immemorial topicality are the residuum, regardless of any theory of understanding. These questions were already raised in the myths and likewise by philosophers, and a plethora of proposals have been made for their solution. These responses show once more that myths are less about knowledge than they are about the attempt to understand—an attempt that does not necessarily succeed, at least not to the point of achieving a consensus free from latent or patent contradiction. If we consider issues of the human sense of being and existence, issues of the self and the world, problems of living together in families and larger social groups, constellations of "good" and "evil," right and wrong, freedom and coercion—in brief, all those spheres that Vico brings into his historical scholarship of the human race—we find ourselves, after two and a half millennia of "Western" thought, facing what Leszek Kolakowski calls the "painfully undeniable fact," that "not a single one" of the questions that have "sustained European philosophy," including religion, has been answered to general agreement:

[It is] no odder now than in ancient Greece to believe or to deny that phenomena can be distinguished from essences, no more unusual to hold that the distinction between good and evil is a contingent one, a matter of convention, than to claim that it is embedded in the necessary order of things. Belief and non-belief in God are equally respectable [...].<sup>46</sup>

Speaking of human "respectability," one final observation: as we acknowledge the fruits of work with myth, it must not be forgotten that the falsification and adulteration of myth can lead to unacceptable consequences which even the most "distanced understanding" would reject. This is seen particularly in the widely lamented interest of the National Socialists in the mythical, as is the fact that recent tendencies towards re-mythification resist challenge. It is perhaps understandable in view of recent experience that myth and the mythical, and hence also the ancient stories subsumed within these concepts, were for decades after World War II discredited in public consciousness (the "ban on myth").<sup>47</sup> It remains vitally urgent to remain alert to new parareligious-fascistic appropriations, and indeed to any perversion

<sup>46</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, 1988. *Metaphysical Horror* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), iv – v.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. e.g. Karl Heinz Bohrer, ed., *Mythos und Moderne. Begriff und Bild einer Rekonstruktion* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1983), esp. 7 – 11.

of an ideological or propagandistic sort. The perversion of myth by the Nazi Nation-State is of course a complex historical phenomenon; and Vico's approach can offer an important corrective. Proper objective and scholarly engagement with the plurality of ancient stories, the fascinating phenomenon of myth, and its inexhaustible fertility is the appropriate response to these dangers. Only thus can we succeed in showing that the particular quality of myths lies in the very fact of their evasion of the demand for general validity, the fact that the reasons proffered are always available for more than *one* verdict and more than *one* historical reading.

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