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Vico's More than Human Humanism

Our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation. The most priceless and indispensable part of a philologist's heritage is still his own nation's culture and language. Only when he is first separated from this heritage, however, and then transcends it does it become truly effective.

(Auerbach, "Philology and *Weltliteratur* 17)

Introduction

In an essay on "Erich Auerbach, Critic of the Earthly World," Edward Said noted that the English translation of Auerbach's monograph on *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (1929; *Dante, Poet of the Secular World*, 1961) renders only partially the crucial word *irdischen*. A better way of translating *irdischen*, Said suggests, would be "earthly," which is considerably less concrete than "secular" but more suggestive of Auerbach's approach to Dante and more in general to literature (13). Said's interpretation of *Mimesis* (1946) further clarifies Auerbach's complex and articulated method pointing to the tensions between, on the one hand, his erudite and sensitive attention to the details of Christian symbolism, enriched by his own Jewish background, and on the other hand, his firm focus on the "earthly," the historical, the worldly. In this view, "earthly" means "historical" implying and implementing a humanistic line of thought that has two major focal points in Dante and Vico. Said suggests that Auerbach's humanism follows Vico in promoting the crucial factor of human intellectual power and will in "making history"; thus, the main epistemological point for Vico, in Auerbach's interpretation, is that human events can be understood only within the modifications of the human mind, which makes and then can "re-examine its own history from the point of view of the maker" (15).

According to Said, Vico represents the origin of the radical humanist idea that "human mind creates the divine, not the other way around." The eclipse of the divine, Said suggests, is already presaged in Dante's poem and leads to the idea at the core of Auerbach's methodology that reality is completely historical (28). In this view the incarnation of the Christ figure in the earthly world made it possible to think of humanity from an earthly perspective and played a central role in the process of organizing and understanding history as a human product, and according to human laws. Said focuses his reading of Auerbach's *Mimesis* on this radical and historical idea of "earthly" that reaffirms, but also to some degree, undermines the religious dimension based on the divine.

Auerbach develops a relatively more complex idea of "earthly" in a later essay entitled "Philology and *Weltliteratur*" (1952), where he writes that "our

philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation." In counterposing the perspective of the earth to the one of the nation Auerbach points, on the one hand, to the pitfalls of historical narrations based on the idea of nation and nationalism and, on the other hand, to the need for a synthetic point of view that has to be not only transnational but also transhistorical. For Said, the affirmation of humanism at the center of Auerbach's late essay is based on the vision of *Weltliteratur* as "universal literature, or literature which expresses *Humanität*, humanity." In the tradition of *Weltliteratur* opened by Goethe and developed by Auerbach, Said still sees this expression of *Humanität* as "literature's ultimate's purpose," as he writes in the introduction to his translation of Auerbach's "Philology and *Weltliteratur*" (1).

The goal of the present essay is twofold. First, it further discusses one of the main principles of both Auerbach's and Said's historicist humanism — Giambattista Vico's idea that *verum et factum convertuntur* — arguing in favor of a more problematic reception of this crucial epistemological principle starting from Vico's early work *De antiquissima italorum sapientia* (*On the most ancient wisdom of the Italians*, 1710). Secondly, this essay promotes a new understanding of Vico's humanism based on a new, truly Vichian interpretation of Auerbach's idea that "our philological home is the earth." The exclusive attention to the *verum factum* synthetic epistemology leads both Auerbach and Said to neglect important analytical and genealogical dimensions of Vico's philology, losing the productive interplay between philology and philosophy characteristic of Vico's thought. In their interpretation Vico's philosophy is reduced to a pervasive historicism and perspectivism. They maintain that Vico identifies history and human nature, and conceives human nature as a function of history. Auerbach even suggests that the word "natura" in some crucial paragraphs of Vico's *Scienza nuova*, such as 346 and 347, should be translated by "historical development" ("Vico and Aesthetic Historicism" 118). This interpretation has been further developed by Pietro Piovanini in his important essay on "Vico senza natura" ("Vico without nature") that insisted on the complete historicization of nature and human nature, even though it admitted the presence of complex oscillations in the meaning of the word "nature" in Vico's *Scienza nuova* (264).

While I concede that Vico's philosophy tends to blur the distinction between "original nature" and "human institutions," I nevertheless disagree with Auerbach when he states that such distinction is "meaningless" for Vico (116). Auerbach's and Said's readings pay attention exclusively to the creation of human institutions, whereas this essay considers how in Vico the alterity of nature also plays a role in the formation of humanity, as part of the complexity and interconnectivity of life, resisting acritical historicization and reduction to purely human paradigms. Unlike Machiavelli's, Vico's idea of humanity and human institutions is not based simply on Roman history. He perceived the need to consider and investigate the "empty spaces" of history to understand the

deepest layers deposited by history in the human mind, including the pre-alphabetic culture (Badaloni 25).

The theoretical implications of this problematic approach to Vico's humanism and making of history lead to a new understanding of Auerbach's idea that "our philological home is the earth," one in which philology and philosophy in a genuinely Vichian fashion return to interrogate not only the historical institutions but also their relationships to earth and the natural environment as a significant part in the formation of humanity. Thus, this essay proposes Vico's idea of "places of humanity" as the driving force of a new humanism, one that is "more than human," and finally pays attention to what has been excluded or not valorized from purely historicist interpretations of his philosophy.

Vico's verum factum principle in the De antiquissima

In *De antiquissima* Vico holds that the constitutive and differentiating element of humanity is related to the concept of *animus*. He claims that the most ancient wisdom of the Italians distinguished between *animus* (the sensitive function and motion of air through the nerves), and *anima* (soul, the vital function and motion of air through the blood). Vico argues that, according to the Latins, only human beings possess *animus* as an internal principle of movement, which is free from the deterministic chain of nature. Whereas *animus* as a higher principle of freedom generates in humans the longing for infinity and immortality, *anima* remains implicated in the mechanistic and corruptible functions of the human body (V). In the *animus* and in the connected idea of immortality Vico sees the specific anthropological dimension of infinity that Christian metaphysics will develop much later. Like Descartes and Malebranche, in *De antiquissima* Vico thinks that animals and brutes possess only mechanistic sensitive faculties and, in this sense, they lack *animus*, which is what triggers memory and *ingenium*, the other faculties inherently proper to human nature (VII). Thus, the relationship man-animal in *De antiquissima* is strictly dualistic; however, as we will see in the second section of this essay, it will become more problematic and "permeable" in the *New Science* (Perullo 99).

Vico attributes to the Latins what is going to become an important epistemological principle of his philosophy, the idea that the true is the made (*verum ipse factum*), and that science is cognition of how something is made (I.1). A close reading of Vico's early work prevents a purely secular and "earthly" interpretation of such principle as the one developed first by Auerbach and then by Said. Vico argues that the first and complete truth is in God, the first Maker "because it represents to Him all the elements of things, both external and internal, since He contains them" (I.1). Human making, on the other hand, does not receive the *elementa rei* from revelation but it proceeds by dissecting nature and creating its own images of *elementa rei*.

Humans have no direct access to the natural elements; their making is one with their knowing in the sense that is essentially a dissection of elements already given and dependent on the ontology of the divine *prior unum*. Human understanding is not only *colligere*, collecting the elements of things, but first and above all *minuere*, dissecting things in order to grasp them (I.2). While intelligence and understanding (*intelligere*) are appropriate to God, discursive thought (*cogitatio*) is what is proper to human mind because it "is limited and external to everything else that is not itself." Consequently, human mind "is confined to the outside edges of things only, and can never gather them all together" (I.1).

Vico's metaphysics elaborates an analogy between human mind and God's will but it does not cancel the distinction of the *causa essendi* and does not absorb the infinite in the finite, as happened in Suárez's *Disputationes metaphysicae*. Vico argues that abstraction is a defect proper to human mind and mother of human science: whereas God defines things according to the true, "man feigns for himself a world of numbers and forms" (I.II). Human creativity imitates God's creativity and this is particularly evident in mathematics, a human construction in which the mathematician creates out of nothing the primitives of this science: the point, the line and the surface. However, these primitives as product of human *ingenium* have no direct referent and remain fictions (*ficta*), mediations and abstractions. In other words, mathematics, the most exact science, is very useful to investigate nature, but it doesn't provide any ontological evidence of its constructions and can offer only a limited insight into the world of things.

Vico's *Liber metaphysicus* seeks to reach a kind of understanding of the ultimate elements of natural things, but this is possible only resorting to God's comprehension of all causes as an ideal model that persists as a limit and excellence against which all human sciences must be confronted. The metaphysical true for Vico is "bounded by no limit and distinguished by no form; for it is the infinite principle of all forms." Vico follows here not only what he considers the most ancient wisdom of the Italians but also the tradition of Neoplatonic and Christian metaphysics in pointing out that the most appropriate analogy for metaphysical truth is "light" (III).

Vico's physics in *De antiquissima* is subordinated to this metaphysics, and in many respects remains far away from the mental universe of Galileo's physics. Vico's *Liber metaphysicus* does not promote cognitive objectivism or contemplate idols of knowledge. The human mind has its beginning in the body, a body that is not conceived as pure natural object to be measured but as creative power, already inhabited by *conatus* and the metaphysical points hidden under the surface of phenomena. For Vico these hidden inclinations and impulses represent the origin of the human world, the first and most important *elementa rei* elaborated by human mind as mediating elements, abstractions and fictions. Croce was right, the *conatus* and the metaphysical points are fictions, but this

does not detract from the methodological value of Vico's theory, if we consider that for him even the mathematical elements are related to the metaphysical points and pertain to the same fictive realm, because they are not ontologically independent from God's creation, from God's *verum genitum*.

Notwithstanding the idea of *animus*, the mediating power of *conatus*, and the metaphysical points, Vico's metaphysics in *De antiquissima* remains strictly dualistic and does not elaborate a convincing, verisimilar, and effective bridge between human and divine nature (Vitiello, "Il medio assente" 94). Human mind participates in the divine mind, but it does not have complete access to the ultimate order of the causes that in a human perspective remains dependent on chance and fortune. Finally, Vico's metaphysics does not erase the alterity of the human mind compared with the divine, and sets up a hierarchy of human sciences in which the most certain is "revealed theology" since it deals only with complete truth. The list of Vico's sciences includes in descending order mathematics, mechanics, physics, medicine, logic and ethics. Mathematics is the closest science to the divine *verum genitum* because the mathematicians operate with their own fictions and abstractions, whereas the other sciences do not construct their elements as meticulously and independently, because they are related to human *conscientia* more than to human *scientia*.

More than any other science ethics is related to *conscientia*, human passions, and external conditions. Nonetheless, ethics shares with the other sciences not only the constructive faculty of *ingenium* and the *verum factum* principle but also the recourse to the *ars topica* that combined with *ars critica* provides the basis for *prudentia* and Vico's idea of practical wisdom in *De antiquissima* (Miner 69-70). Vico's terminology comes from Ciceronian humanism and theological tradition (Otto, "Interpretation" 19; Milbank II, 32), but he reinvents them in a new philosophical perspective. The *ars topica* represent the realm of the *verisimilis coniectura* and provides the basis for comprehending the value of the singular, particular, and contingent experience. The *ars critica* lays the ground for comparing the individual elements within a logical structure. Certitude for Vico is possible only combining the *invenire* of the *ars topica* with the *iudicare* of the *ars critica* (*De antiquissima* VII). The combination of *inventio* and *iudicium* creates the *tertia ars*, the *methodus*, the *mos geometricus*, the *via synthetica* (as opposed to the *via analytica*) that is the philosophical comprehension.

The tension between the infinite divine wisdom and the finite human knowledge will be articulated in new forms in the *New Science*, based on the constructive power of *poiesis* and *praxis*. Nonetheless, Vico's metaphysics as conceived in *De antiquissima* will continue to be important in his major work. As the theory of the *conatus* and the metaphysical points will be less and less relevant, in front of the new value of the human creation, its methodological value will not disappear, because for Vico the search for a medium between the divine and human knowledge will still be important and, at the same time,

problematic. As Mazzotta writes, "marginality and liminality [...] are crucial categories of Vico's thought" that challenges "the tyranny of historicism that, above all in Naples, wills to coerce all experience within the boundaries of the contingent and leaves no real room for metaphysics" (14).

The Beginnings of Humanity and the Problem of Agency

There are different opinions among scholars in regard to the problem of the continuity between the metaphysics of the *De antiquissima* and Vico's *New Science*. Notably, Sandra Luft in her recent work on *Vico's Uncanny Humanism* sees a substantial difference between Vico's idea of the *verum factum* principle in the two works. She holds that the poetic language that Vico attributes to the first men in the *New Science* is "a secularization of the linguistic agency of the Poet-God of the Hebrews," a language which is divine because "it is creative of the human world" (xiv). In Luft's interpretation the *verum factum* principle in the *New Science* loses the epistemological emphasis it had in *De antiquissima* and becomes an ontological principle identifying humans as makers who create their human world with an ontologically constructive poetic language. Both in Genesis and in Vico's *New Science* the origins of humanity are related to an "originary linguistic event unconditioned by spiritual or subjective intent or a priori order" (35). The idea of creation of the human world in the *New Science* is equated by Luft to the Biblical conception of creation *ex nihilo* as an "originary" event that takes place outside of being.

Luft's complete privileging the theological perspective along with the bracketing of the metaphysical dimension of the *De antiquissima* is arguable. It is evident that the relationships between physics and metaphysics in the *New Science* cannot be the same as in the 1710 treatise. In Vico's masterpiece the *verum factum* principle as indicative of human *poiesis* and *praxis* becomes the master key to open the archeological study of the formation of human civil world. As Vico writes, his new science is constructivist like geometry "che, mentre sopra i suoi elementi il costruisce o 'l contempla, essa stessa si faccia il mondo delle grandezze [...]" ("when it constructs the world of quantity out of its elements, or contemplates that world is creating for itself [...]"). but, he adds., our science creates for itself the world of nations "con tanto più di realtà quanta più ne hanno gli ordini d'intorni alle faccende degli uomini, che non ne hanno punti, linee, superficie e figure." ("with a reality greater by just so much as the institutions having to do with human affairs are more real than points, lines, surfaces, and figures" *Scienza nuova* 349; hereinafter *Sn*). However, the problem of the metaphysical foundation of Vico's method remains open even in the *New Science*, and to understand in what sense Vico speaks of *mos geometricus* in his masterpiece one still needs to consider *De antiquissima* and the initial formulation of the *verum factum* principle. As Vico writes:

In cotal guisa i primi uomini delle nazioni gentili, come fanciulli del nascente gener umano, quali gli abbiamo pur nelle Dignità divisato, dalla lor idea criavan essi le cose, ma con infinita differenza però dal criare che fa Iddio: perocché Iddio, nel suo purissimo intendimento, conosce e, conoscendole, cria le cose; essi, per la loro robusta ignoranza, il facevano in forza d'una corpulentissima fantasia, e, perch'era corpulentissima, il facevano con una maravigliosa sublimità, tal e tanta che perturbava all'eccesso essi medesimi che fingendo le si criavano, onde furon detti "poeti", che lo stesso in greco suona che "criatori" (*Scienza nuova* 376; emphasis added).

(In such fashion the first men of the gentile nations, children of nascent mankind [...] created things according to their own ideas. But this creation was infinitely different from that of God. For God, in his purest intelligence, knows things, and by knowing them, creates them; but they in their robust ignorance, did it by virtue of a wholly corporeal imagination. And because it was quite corporeal, they did it with marvelous sublimity; a sublimity such and so great that it excessively perturbed the very persons who by feigning did the creating, for which they were called "poets," which is Greek for "makers.")

The word *criatori* (makers) for Vico does not mean "making" in the technical-instrumental sense and, conceptually; it refers to human *praxis* more than to human *poiesis* (Haddock 181; Grassi 201; Ball 222). Poetic knowledge, as Vico presents it, does not correspond to the classical sense of the word *poiesis* as an action that transforms the natural world in tangible, practical, and self-contained ends (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1048 b, 18-23). On the contrary, poetic metaphysics for Vico creates meaning and reveals a world without fabricating or manufacturing anything; it refers at least in part to what Aristotle calls *praxis* as the realm of a collective endeavor, the result of interaction and communication. Whereas *praxis* as the realm of practical knowledge is governed by human *conscientia* and *prudentia*, *poiesis* as the territory of human and divine science is governed by *ars*. One may argue that in every instance of *poiesis* there is an element of *praxis* and vice versa. Nevertheless, one should consider that Vico maintains the distinction between God's creation and human creation as related to the difference between *poiesis* and *praxis*, and that in a strict sense conceptually he attributes *poiesis* and creation *ex nihilo* only to God.

Karl Löwith has pointed to the onto-theological foundation of Vico's *verum factum* principle and Milbank has emphasized that Vico sees "divine *scientia* or transcendent *verum factum*, as operating as a metaphysical ground for the imperfect human truths of *conscientia*." It follows that the metaphysical and epistemological accounts of *verum factum* are compatible, "human beings participate in divine being and divine knowledge" (I, 99). However, onto-theological interpretations tend to blur the distinction between human and divine knowledge, something that Vico is not ready to admit. Moreover, they neglect to recognize any positive role to the natural environment which they consider a pure function of human action. Milbank considers the originality of Vico's feral

hypothesis and his idea of a "pre-linguistic humanity which is not properly human at all" (II, 30). Nonetheless, he neutralizes Vico's radical view by setting aside the importance of the Lucretian tradition and reducing Vico's *bestioni* to the "Ciceronian and rhetorical tradition which stressed the myths of Orpheus and Hercules who were supposed to have charmed civilized humanity into being through the power of a poetic, musical speech" (II, 32).

On their part, interpreting his "Ideal Eternal History" of the divine Providence in purely immanent terms, secularist, materialist and historicist interpretations of Vico have failed to appreciate that in Vico knowledge maintains a fundamental metaphysical dimension. Along these lines, Hannah Arendt interpreted Vico as the father of the modern historical consciousness and the forerunner of a concept of history as human "fabrication" and construction (57-58). These interpretations overlook the critical dimension of Vico's new science, which in his own words is, after all, based on a "nuova arte critica" that resists the pressing claims and pretensions of modern cognitive and instrumental science, precisely in the name of a philosophy mindful of the metaphysical tradition in which the tension between finite and infinite is not resolved and the divine light not completely absorbed in the human mind.

Vico reverses Galilei's invitation to adapt to the vulgar, ignorant, and common people when speaking outside of the scientific community ("Lettera a Cristina"; Badaloni 21); for Vico the wisdom of the philosophers starts with the vulgar wisdom as expressed in the fables and myths of the primitives. He does not want to reduce metaphysics to heuristics; the human mind is supposed to know the civil world while creating it, but human world and nature in Vico's metaphysics do not coincide completely with the human mind. On the one hand, nature is God's creation; on the other hand, the civil and human world interact and intersect with the natural world. Historicist readings of Vico's *New Science* run the risk of reducing Vico's new science to a set of formulas meant to explain in mechanistic terms the actual history of humanity. These readings tend to erase the metaphysical nature of Vico's philosophy, which is best preserved within the archeological dimension of Vico's hermeneutics of myth: what Vico identifies with the ages of gods and of heroes.

This is the vital dimension of Vico's metaphysical idea of history and points to a study of how humanity came about in fabulous times. This crucial dimension is lost when one focuses on the third age, the age of humanity, only to develop closed-end historical interpretations that remain detached from Vico's complex mythical and narrative approach to human history.¹ Such interpretations do not consider that the conversion of the *certum*, discovered

through philological proofs, into the *verum*, developed by philosophical reflection (*Sn* 138), is an open-end process whose invariable is not only the Ideal Eternal History but also the alterity that is inscribed at the core of human experience: "The New science has told us that there is a world which is outside the projects and the consciousness of each individual, and this residue, which appears as a form of otherness, is also the place where every human project begin" (Mazzotta 14). Vico's thought loses its force and actuality if it is not seen in relation to the resistance, the obstacles, and the impulses deriving from the interaction between nature and the civil world (Badaloni 22).

In one of his memorable axioms Giambattista Vico writes: "L'uomo per l'indiffinita natura della mente umana, ove questa si rovesci nell'ignoranza, egli fa sé regola dell'universo" ("Because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance, man makes himself the measure of all things" *Sn* 120). Vico reflects here on Pico della Mirandola's view of man in the *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1486), emphasizing the excellence and majesty of the human being set by God at the center of the world as a "creature of indeterminate image" (V, 18). However, in dealing with the "indefinite nature of human mind," Vico's emphasis is not on human freedom and excellence, but on human ignorance. He is still mindful of what he wrote in *De antiquissima*: the human mind is indeterminate not because of its imperfect essence but because of the functional and structural distinction between the human *verum factum* and the divine *verum genitum*. Human *verum factum*, even though analogous to the divine creation, is still contingent and unable reach the complete geometric congruence even in the last version of the *New Science*.

Vico's accounts of the beginnings of gentile humanity are not based on the idea of creation *ex nihilo* but on the originary linguistic and social practices of proto-humans living in the world of nature. The language of the creators of the human world is neither self-contained and original nor self-determined but it emerges out of imaginative reactions to external stimuli triggered by the natural environment which is given to humans and in which humans participate. Vico does not solve the ontological problem recurring in an abstract idea of nature but certainly in his vision nature is not simply a secondary or subordinate element. The first humans of the gentile world tried to make sense of their surroundings and of their violent passions, inventing natural metaphors and myths. Their creation of the human world is not immediate; it is the result of a dialectic between freedom and necessity, and in Vico's fictive account, it receives the first impulse by the mediating power of the *conatus*, which moves the primitives to extrapolate *humanitas* out of the *animalitas* of violent passions.²

¹ In *De antiquissima* Vico attributes to the Latins an esoteric wisdom that was brought to Italy by the Egyptians. In the *New Science* he will deny any value to esoteric and occult wisdom ("sapienza riposta") and the very possibility of metaphysical ideas among archaic civilizations.

² Vico recalls the theory of the *conatus*, elaborated in *De antiquissima*, in several important parts of the *New Science*, from the section on "Method" in Book One to the "Conclusion," where he writes that the *bestioni* had to hold in *conatus* the impetus of the bodily passions to become humans.

The beginning of gentile humanity for Vico took place when the primitive *bestioni*, frightened by thunder and lightning, named the sky Jove, inventing at the same time language, myth, poetry, and religion out of fear of God, *timor dei*, as Vico says (*Sn* 375). In this sense for Vico the first poets were poet-theologians. On the one hand, Vico alludes to the role of divine Providence in the formation of the human institutions; on the other hand, he emphasizes that the origins of humanity are located in a borderline condition, the *bestione*, who is not an animal but a *monstrum*, conceived as a hybrid between human animality and the proper form of humanity. In the “tempo oscuro” “obscure time” of the “divagamento ferino” (“feral wandering”) — the two hundred years between the flood and the first thunder from the heavens — the *bestioni* are bestial and lawless races who live “sparse e disperse per la gran selva della terra” (“scattered and dispersed through the great forest of the earth” *Sn* 195), “nudi d’ogni umano costume, e privi d’ogni umana favella, e sì in uno stato di bruti animali” (“destitute of any human custom and deprived of any human speech, and so in a state of wild animals” *Sn* 62). Moreover, the feral state “si divora il tutto degli uomini, perché essi non lasciano nulla di sé nella loro posterità” (“swallows up all mankind in that they leave nothing of themselves to their posterity” *Sn* 717).

In Vico’s account the earth plays an important role in creating the conditions that facilitated the beginning of humanity:

E tanto tempo appunto vi bisognò correre, che la terra, disseccata dall’umidore dell’universale diluvio, potesse mandare in aria delle esalazioni secche a potersi ingenerare de’ fulmini, da’ quali gli uomini storditi e spaventati si abbandonassero alle false religioni [...].

(*Sn* 62)

(It was necessary that just so much time should pass before the earth, having at last dried off from the wetness of the universal flood, could send off dry exhalations of the sort wherein lightning could be generated, which stunned and terrified men into abandoning themselves to the false religions [...].)

Vico underlines that “by means of frightful religions and terrible paternal powers and sacred ablutions they brought forth from their giant bodies the form of our just *corporature*” and concludes that “con la stessa disciplina iconomica eglino, da’ lor animi bestiali, edussero la forma de’ nostri animi umani” (“by discipline of their household economy they brought forth from their bestial mind the form of our human mind” *Sn* 692; emphasis added). Vico’s attitudes toward animals participates in the anthropocentrism developed in ancient philosophy by Plato and Aristotle; moreover, it is inscribed within the Christian idea where the beast is considered as function of the human being. In other words, Vico is far away from Montaigne’s animalism that targeted and de-centralized human

presumption, refusing to attribute divine features to men and separate them from all other creatures: “Quand je me joue à ma chatte, qui sçait si elle passe son temps de moi, plus que je ne fay d’elle?” (*Essais* 190; “When I play with my cat, who knows whether she is not making me her pastime more than I make her mine?”). However, Vico’s conception of the relationship between the human and the animal is not purely oppositional, and in the *New Science* it is possible to find traces of ancient cosmocentrism as it appears in Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* (V 9-415; 771-1427). Thus, the *bestione* who starts the humanization of the world bears some features of the beast (Perullo 237), and points to the earth as partial and common matrix for men and animals. This leads to the conclusion that even though Vico’s *New Science* concentrates on the formation of human institutions, it nonetheless recalls something that comes before the human, the “feral wandering,” and something that is more than human: on the one hand, the earth and the original sites of humanity such as the forests; on the other hand, the metaphysical dimension as represented by the *conatus* and the metaphysical points.

The first language for Vico is monosyllabic (*Sn* 231) and generates a process of signification based on visual and acoustic elements (*Sn* 230; 832). The first articulate language began to develop by way of onomatopoeia (*Sn* 447) in a fashion that manifests the profound junction of sound, thing, and word. Most scholars, including Milbank, do not consider the importance of onomatopoeia and see the origins of language in Vico’s theory of metaphor and myth (II 29). On the contrary, the natural language described by Vico entails not only the reduction of natural objects to human consciousness — by attributing a modern conception of consciousness to the primitive mind, such gesture would correspond to what Vico calls the “boria dei dotti” (“conceit of scholars,” *Sn* 124; 126) — but also an original and reciprocal co-belonging of humans and natural signs and objects (Vitiello, *Vico* 89).

This original language is not the expression of human subjectivity, freedom, or action, and takes place as an event deeply implicated with the earth, the sky, and the body, as a combination of voices, gestures, bodily expressions, and natural phenomena:

I primi uomini che parlavan per cenni, dalla loro natura credettero i fulmini, i tuoni fossero i cenni di Giove [...] che Giove comandasse co’ cenni, e tali cenni fossero parole reali, e che la natura fusse le lingua di Giove.

(*Sn* 379)

(The first men, who spoke by signs, naturally believed that lightning bolts and thunderclaps were signs made to them by Jove [...], that Jove commanded by signs, that such signs were real words, and that nature was the language of Jove.)

Reason and reflection are not a point of departure for human civilization but later developments of a process that originated under the impulse of wild and ferocious passions and was triggered by the *conatus*, the generating power of movement, which pervades all of nature, and human drive toward infinity and immortality. The primitives named Jove, Cybele, and Neptune as “sostanze del cielo, della terra, del mare, ch’essi immaginarono animate divinità, e perciò con verità dei sensi gli credevano dèi” (“substances of the sky, the earth, and the sea, which they imagined to be animate divinities and were therefore true to their senses in believing them to be gods” *Sn* 402). Humanity emerges out of Chaos, the “padre della note civile (della note de’ nomi)” (“father of civil night in which names are obscured” (*Sn* 717), through the process of naming. The names transcribe on the support of the voice the living experience and give substance to the world experienced; they create signs, a system of measurement, knowledge, a poetic logic which is at the same time a conquest and an alienation. The names as an extension of the body are not created by humans out of nothing but in the actual interaction with the natural environment in which the body partakes; they create the conditions for becoming human and at the same time engender difference as the interruption of immediacy in the relation to nature.

Vico does not search the origin of humanity in “history” or in intentional designs but in the necessary interaction between the natural environment and the human body, characterized by not knowing, by human ignorance. Imaginative universals and originary metaphors represent for Vico the intersection, the “suture” of the human body into the external nature (Kunze 55-56). For this reason Vico’s imagination and poetic logic show that behind the cultural and conventional meaning of words there is something “wild” deeply related to the body and elemental passions:

Ma delle lingue volgari egli è stato ricevuto con troppo di buona fede da tutti i filologi ch’elleno significassero a placito, perch’esse, per queste loro origini naturali, debbon aver significato naturalmente [...] la lingua volgare latina [...] quasi tutte le voci ha formate per trasporti di nature o per proprietà naturali e per effetti sensibili.

(*Sn* 444).

(The philologists have all accepted with an excess of good faith the view that vulgar languages meanings were fixed by convention. On the contrary, because of their natural origins, they must have had natural significations [...] vulgar Latin has formed almost all its words by metaphors drawn from natural objects according to their natural properties or sensible effects.)

The natural significations originate not in meaningful words but in the monosyllabic screams expressing great emotions, in an immediate and reciprocal exchange in which human and natural languages pervasively

intersect. Vico emphasizes that “la locuzione poetica esser nata per necessità di natura umana prima della prosaica” (“by a necessity of human nature poetic style arose before prose style” *Sn* 460). Several Vico scholars recognize that in interpreting his thought the starting point is precisely “necessity” because the aim of primitive imagination is not liberty but the establishment of limits as protection against the chaos of the surrounding natural world (Auerbach, “Vico and Aesthetic Historicism” 116). Ernesto Grassi rightly suggests that Vico’s metaphysics cannot be reduced to modern anthropology, as it is not based on ontology of beings but on philology of human praxis and becoming. Nonetheless, like many other Vico scholars, he does not entertain the idea of permeable boundaries between the emerging human world and the world of nature in Vico’s account of the origins of humanity. This attitude leads Grassi to interpret Vico’s *ingenium* as memory of Being, using Heidegger’s terminology, and to hold that Vico’s points of departure are words and myths rather than the obscure and nameless time of the feral wandering (Grassi 82-83). In that obscure time, “wild and savage men in despair of nature’s succors desired something superior to nature to save them.” They became able to apprehend divine providence through their senses, being deceived into fearing the false divinity of Jove because he could strike them with lightning (*Sn* 385). One may argue with Grassi that during those barbarian times the only order that appeared to terrified wild humans was “the inexorable continuity of history within which man arose, lived, perished” (Grassi 88). Nevertheless, it should never be forgotten that for Vico history does not begin in the purity of human institutions including language and myth but in the inarticulate screams of the *bestioni*.

There is a significant convergence between Vico’s idea on the origin of language and that of the French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.³ Like Vico, Merleau-Ponty radically distinguishes his ideas from those of Descartes. For both Vico and Merleau-Ponty Descartes’s philosophy — as summarized in the famous “Je pense, donc je suis” (*Discours de la méthode* IV; “I think therefore I am”) — has detached the conscious subject from the world that is given in experience, and created the illusion that humans completely make the nature that is given to them (Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie* x).

By refusing what he calls the “boria dei dotti” (*Sn* 124; 126) and pointing to an originary, pre-cultural, and unspoken element about the relation of humans to nature, Vico anticipated Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the intercorporeality originating human relations with nature (Merleau-Ponty, *Nature* 216-26). Vico’s poetic language and Merleau-Ponty’s idea of perception do not refer to a process by which human consciousness knows nature and the “external world” as neutral, separated, and conventional objects. Poetic language and perception, on

³ Abram suggested, in passing, the originality of Vico’s idea of language as an anticipation of Merleau-Ponty’s.

the contrary, are behaviors effected by the body, not as an observer but as a living and active body, participating in the life of nature. In this way, humanity emerges not as a substance, and essence, "an imposition of a for-itself on a body in-itself" but as interbeing, as an event in which the body is interposed in the circuit of the world (208-09).

It is very important to maintain the hermeneutical value of Vico's interpretation of the origins of humanity in the gentile world and problematize the question of agency in the process of becoming human. One has to keep in mind not only all the different and intersected stages of the process, but also that for Vico the undertaking of humanization is not conclusive and always exposed to the possibility of a return to "barbarismo del senso" ("barbarism of sense"), even in the age of reason (*Sn* 1106). Even in the "age of men," the process of becoming human does not include the vision of humans freely asserting themselves through the *verum factum* principle and the "creation" of history. This is particularly true for the ages of gods and heroes that represent entire centuries of pre-history or mythological history; but in different ways all the three ages present a "weak" free will.

Human will for Vico is "di sua natura incertissimo" ("by its nature most uncertain" *Sn* 390). What makes human choice certain and determined is, on the one hand, "senso commune degli uomini d'intorno alle umane necessità o utilità" ("the common sense of men with respect to human needs or utilities" *Sn* 141) and, on the other hand, the concomitant action of a providential order that motivates Vico to state that human institutions are created "senza veruno umano scorgimento o consiglio, e sovente contro gli stessi proponimenti degli uomini" ("without human discernment or intention and often against the designs of men" *Sn* 342). Thus, he concludes that whereas "rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them" ("homo intelligendo fit omnia"), his "imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by not understanding them" ("homo non intelligendo fit omnia" *Sn* 405).

Vico's idea of human agency is a complex one and is not based on a conception of sovereign subjectivity in total control of the institutions it creates and its environment. His philosophy cannot be reduced to constructivist epistemologies as they have been negatively represented by Friedrich von Hayek, who conceived constructivism as a truly Cartesian epistemology, based on the idea that human societies are the exclusive product of human projects. Even the idea that Vico is a precursor of the more complex radical constructivism theory, as suggested by Ernst von Glasersfeld, should be critically resisted. While it is understandable that radical constructivism is interested in Vico's thought for his attention to collective, social, and historical contexts, it should be nonetheless recognized that Vico neglects the central claim of constructivist epistemologies, i.e., the idea that knowledge is a self-organized and self-sufficient cognitive process. Thus, Vico's philosophy surely cannot be reduced to a pure biological *autopoiesis* as conceived by Chilean

biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, or to a sort of naturalist philosophy in which the human does not have an agency. Vico's idea of human action is dynamic and relational not only because it speaks to the collectivity more than to the individual, but also because it contemplates a more than human activity.

Finally, the primal scene in which Vico describes how humanity came about in the gentile world includes a natural agency that the primitives interpret as divine. The importance of this element in Vico's philology and philosophy has been neglected by scholars like Auerbach, Said, and Hannah Arendt who interpreted Vico's thought emphasizing only the active role of human factors in the formation of humanity and the firm focus on the "earthly" conceived as the historical, the worldly. Vico's idea of earth is not reducible to the historical dimension of the worldly but points to the Latin word *humus* as fundamental root of the word *humando* (burying), one of the basic and original human institutions (*Sn* 12). In other words, Vico's etymology of "human" bears witness to an origin of humanity more ancient than the historical, one that is dependent on a specific relationship to the earth and located in specific places. Vico repeats his account in many different paragraphs of his new science starting from paragraph 13:

On certain occasions "dalla Provvidenza divina ordinate" ("ordained by divine providence") "some of the giants "scosse e destate da un terribile spavento [...] *finalmente se ne ristarono alquanti e si nascosero in certi luoghi*" ("shaken and aroused by a terrible fear [...] left off wandering and went into hiding in definite places" *Sn* 13; emphasis added). These giants lived "nel fondo e nei nascondigli delle grotte per sotto i monti [...] *incatenati alla terra*" ("into the depths and recesses of the caves under the mountains [...] chained to the earth" (*Sn* 387; emphasis added). There, "per lo timore dell'appresa divinità [...] coi congiugnimenti carnali religiosi e pudichi, celebrarono i matrimoni [...] e così fondarono le famiglie" ("through fear of the apprehended divinity [...] in religious and chaste carnal unions they solemnized marriages [...] and so founded families"). Then, "con lo star quivi fermi lunga stagione e con le seppulture degli antenati, si ritrovarono aver ivi fondati e divisi i primi domini della terra, cui signori furono detti 'giganti; (ché tanto suona tal voce in greco quanto 'figliuoli della terra, cioè discendenti dai seppelliti)" ("by long residence and burial of their dead they came to found and divide the first dominions of the earth, whose lords were called giants, a Greek word meaning 'children of the earth,' i.e., descendants of those who have been buried" *Sn* 13; emphasis added).

As Vico clarifies in *degnità* 147 and 148 the "nature of things" human and not human depends on their *nascimento* (coming into being). There is no fixed nature for human institutions and Vico's science tends to become a "history of human ideas." However, it is evident that Vico's giants and topology of the earth go well beyond the logical, historical boundaries, even though in reasoning of the origins of "cose divine ed umane della gentilità" ("things divine and human in the gentile world") Vico's science reaches "que' primi oltre i quali è stolta curiosità di domandar altri primi"

("those first beginnings beyond which it is vain to demand other (beginnings) earlier" (346). Vico scholars have stressed above all the necessarily cultural origins of humanity and the need to "posit a 'first' cultural manifestation" (Milbank I, 18). Nonetheless, Vico's inquiry into the pre-cultural and pre-linguistic origins of culture has to be taken seriously for its philosophical view that men are not the only agents in the process of humanization. The process actually started "quando i primi uomini cominciarono a umanamente pensare" ("when the first men began to think humanly") and "non già da quando i filosofi cominciarono a riflettere sopra l'umane idee" ("not when the philosophers began to reflect on human ideas" *Sn* 347). Vico insists that the nature of things could not be what it is if the things had not come into being just as they did, in those particular times, places and fashions (*Sn* 346).⁴

In other words, the historical boundaries and institutions are strictly intertwined not only with chronological and sociological elements but also with the original places of humanity. Humans for Vico are descendants of the giants, the "children of the earth." The emphasis on the "children of the earth" is necessary to promote a common idea of humanity, based not on what humans already are and possess but on what they need and lack. Interestingly enough, contemporary philosopher and environmentalist leader Vandana Shiva — from a different perspective that, of course, does not include Vico's *bestioni* — uses a similar phrasing: "Remembering we are earth citizens and earth children can help us recover our common humanity and help us transcend the deep divisions of intolerance, hate, and fear [...]" (7). In conclusion, Vico's poetic logic links the origin of language to a pre-linguistic and pre-cultural world that he then interprets in terms of a poetic cosmography (*Sn* 710-25) and geography (*Sn* 741-69). His insistence not only on the "times" but also on the "places" of humanity is an invitation to consider that the natural context played a crucial role in the beginnings of humankind, from the origin of language to theology, as Vico inscribes them in the design of divine Providence.

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⁴ One may argue that in some ways Vico's approach to the problem of agency and subjectivity is inclusive of the idea of "lived experience of the natural world" as it emerged two centuries later in environmental philosophy. In particular it prefigures the need of a notion of subject which is "neither merely a conduit or passage (the 'through' of pure passivity) nor the conductor entirely in charge of a performance (the 'by' of pure agency) but it is performed by as much as it performs the process" (Llewelyn ix).

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