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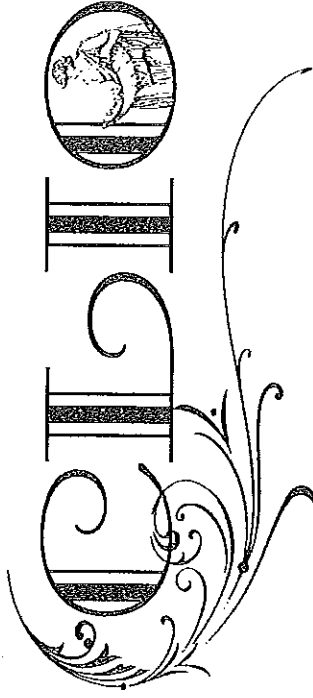
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ISSN 0884-2043

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JEFFREY DIRK WILSON Vico's Metaphysics of Poetic Wisdom

All these were properties of the heroic age of the Greeks, in which and throughout which Homer was an incomparable poet, just because, in the age of vigorous memory, robust imagination, and sublime invention, he was in no sense a philosopher.¹

Why did Giambattista Vico think it necessary to argue that Homer was not a philosopher? At least since the time of classical Greek philosophy, Homer has been interpreted allegorically by philosophers and theologians in a way that claimed him as authority for their own views. There is an extensive literature on Homer as a basis for philosophical and theological allegory.² The premise of much allegorical interpretation is that Homeric texts were really intended philosophically or theologically. The allegorical interpretation was offered as a simple discovery of the text's true meaning. Vico rejected Homer as philosopher because he affirmed Homer as poet. What the allegorizers had missed beginning with Plato, by Vico's account, was that Homer made poetry from the human imagination while philosophers developed philosophy from human reason. Upon that insight, Vico

1. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddiard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984), ¶780, 301. Hereafter cited parenthetically by paragraph number as Vico.

2. For example, see Luc Brisson, *Platon: Les mots et les mythes* (Paris: François Maspero, 1982) and *Introduction à la philosophie du mythe*, vol. 1, *Sauver les mythes*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2005); Félix Buffière, *Les mythes d'Homère et la pensée grecque* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1956); Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986); and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les grecs: Études de psychologie historique*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Editions la Découverte, 1985).

developed his view regarding the imaginative metaphysics of poetry and the rational metaphysics of philosophy. The exploration of that distinction provides a basis for understanding how Homer established much of the ontological framework for later philosophers.

Imaginative and Rational Metaphysics

Vico asserts that, at least among philosophers, everyone has read Homer through Plato: "As Plato left firmly fixed the opinion that Homer was endowed with sublime esoteric wisdom (and all the other philosophers have followed in his train . . .), we shall examine particularly if Homer was ever a philosopher" (Vico, ¶780). It was Vico's claim that first suggested a second, that it is actually the inverse that ought to be done, namely to read Plato (and other philosophers) through Homer. There is need to work from Vico's challenge to the second claim. Vico accuses Plato of attributing to Homer an exoteric meaning of the text for the vulgar and an esoteric wisdom that is manifest enough to the discerning philosopher, such as Plato himself. Giuseppe Mazzotta thinks Vico's reading of Plato's reading of Homer was simply wrong: "Vico's criticism of Plato for inaugurating the traditional view of Homer as a philosopher is, on the face of it, a flagrant misreading of Plato. Plato never claims that Homer's poems have any esoteric wisdom to convey."³ Vico may or may not have been correct in his reading of Plato's reading of Homer, but what did he mean by it? As Mazzotta points out, Plato's understanding of Homer is for Vico "tantamount to considering poetry as a function of philosophy."⁴ By contrast, Vico holds that poetry, to be rightly understood, must be explored in its own terms.

While Vico insists on poetry's rights, he nevertheless uses philosophical categories by which to discuss and measure poetry. One such term is "metaphysics." There is the rational metaphysics of philosophy and the imaginative metaphysics of poetry:

So that, as rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them (*homo intelligendo fit omnia*), this imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by *not* understanding them (*homo non intelligendo fit omnia*); and

3. Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The New Map of the World: The Poetic Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 156.

4. Mazzotta, *New Map of the World*, 143.

perhaps the latter proposition is truer than the former, for when man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them. (¶405)

Understanding is absent from imaginative metaphysics. There is no proper ratiocination. Vico's claim is extraordinarily bold. There is a sense in which imaginative metaphysics is actually more metaphysical than rational metaphysics because when I think of something, I *am* less that something than when I do not think it. When I think "apple," I am less the actual apple than when I am immersed in that apple: seeing it, smelling, touching, tasting it, hearing its crunch. Ratiocinative understanding removes me from my identification with the apple. That is, after all, the character of intelligibility; it is separate from matter and motion. I become the apple when I eat it in a way that I do not when I think it.⁵ Vico acknowledges the difficulty that the modern thinker has just in comprehending this claim: "To discover the way in which this first human thinking arose in the gentle world, we encountered exasperating difficulties which have cost us the research of a good twenty years" (¶338). Understanding the world had been undertaken for so long as an enterprise of the intellect that, with René Descartes, derives nothing from the senses and the imagination⁶ that what Vico discovered and then proposed in his *New Science* (1725) was, in the most literal way, inconceivable.

About the struggle of the modern thinker to enter into the apprehension of the world through imaginative universals, he writes:

5. Leon R. Kass comes at this point from another direction: "No wonder food is so important to survival. Where it goes, there I am; where it goes not, there I am not; what it is, that too am I. We are identical, I and my stuff." *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfection of Our Nature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999), 20. Graham Greene arrives at this same sense of being through nonunderstanding when he presents a scene in which a modern European missionary explains the presence of Jesus Christ to the Christian believer to his premodern African audience (using "modern" and "premodern" in a cultural rather than in a chronological sense): "When you make a song you are in the song; when you bake bread you are in the bread; when you make a baby you are in the baby; and because Yezen made you, he is in you." *A Burnt-Out Case* (New York: Viking, 1961), 97.

6. For example, René Descartes writes, "Neither our imagination nor our senses could ever assure us of anything if our understanding did not intervene." *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, 4th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 1-45, 21.

But the nature of our civilized minds is so detached from the senses, even in the vulgar, by abstractions corresponding to all the abstract terms our languages abound in, and so refined by the art of writing, and as it were spiritualized by the use of numbers, because even the vulgar know how to count and reckon, that it is naturally beyond our power to form the vast image of this mistress called "Sympathetic Nature." . . . It is equally beyond our power to enter into the vast imagination of those first men, whose minds were not in the least abstract, refined or spiritualized, because they were entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, buried in the body. That is why we said above that we can scarcely understand, still less imagine, how those first men thought who founded gentle humanity. (Vico, ¶378)

Imaginative metaphysics is not thought, insofar as thinking is ratiocination, nor can it be thought. By analogy, just as the seeable cannot be heard, nor the touchable smelled, the imaginable cannot be ratiocinated. Vico insists that it is "beyond our power" actually to enter into the apprehension of the world in the way to which poetic mythology witnesses. The parts of the human soul have been so rearranged by the concept and the ratiocinative work of conceptualization that the modern human person, as Vico was, has not the capacity to understand the preconceptual apprehension of the world. Vico is in the position of someone pointing to the mode of apprehension to which neither he nor his readers have access. Thus, Vico observes, quoting Virgil, when some ancient says that "all things are full of Jove" (¶379; quoting Virgil's *Eclogue*, 3.60), the claim entails "the credible impossibility" (¶383). Vico continues, "It is impossible that bodies should be minds, yet it was believed that the thundering sky was Jove" (¶383).

There is a nice example of that to which Vico points as well as the continuing difficulty and even impossibility for the modern or postmodern reader to enter into that at which he points. Homer states that "kai sphin Dios ombros axei" (Zeus's raincloud increases them [the wine grapes]).⁷ Robert Fitzgerald translates that half-line as "ripen in heaven's rain,"⁷⁸ which completely misses the mythological character of Homer's formula; the translation is

7. Homer, *Homer Opera*, vol. 3, *Odyssaea Libros I–XII Continens*, ed. Thomas W. Allen, Oxford Classical Texts (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1917), 9.111, translations from this edition mine.

8. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1951), 142.

completely naturalistic. Robert Fagles seeks to preserve the mythological character in his rendering, "swelled by the rains of Zeus,"⁹ but his translation allows the modern to read the half-line on his own terms. It is Alexander Pope, however, who best captures the quality of a Zeus-infused world: "And Jove descends in each prolific shower."¹⁰ In the Homeric half-line, the divinity and the force of nature are one. The rain is not an act of god; it is god. It is not merely that Zeus is the sky, but that Zeus both is the sky and is the rain, and insofar as the rain fattens the grapes, Zeus is the grapes, too. The difficulty of translating that half-line is an indicator of what is "beyond our power." The problem is not a new one. Already by the time of Aristotle, "Zeus" had become mere metaphor. When Aristotle says "Zeus rains"—and Aristotle does use the term "Zeus rains"¹¹—it is clear that he means, "the sky rains," as translated in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, "A difficulty presents itself: why should not nature work, not for the sake of something, nor because it is better so, but just because as the sky rains, not in order to make the corn grow, but of necessity?"¹² Aristotle does not even pause to explain that when one says "Zeus rains," one understands "the sky rains." That transition is assumed. At some stage, there had been what Vico calls "Sympathetic Nature." By the time of Aristotle, that worldview had come to an end, at least among the literate. By the time of Vico—at least in the Western European sphere—that worldview had come to an end even among the illiterate. Vico points to a *je ne sais quoi*. Like him, the modern and postmodern reader sees that at which he points, but also knows not what¹³

9. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1997), 215.

10. Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Alexander Pope (New York: Fine, 1956), 122.

11. Aristotle, *Physics, Books 1–4*, trans. P. H. Wicksteed and F. M. Cornford (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1970), 4:168, translation mine.

12. Aristotle, *Physics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984), 1:315–446, 1.339. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent references to Aristotle's works are from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*.

13. Richard F. Hassing has contributed substantially to the development of this thought with his suggestions and challenges in a personal conversation with me on May 12, 2004. Donald Phillip Verene comments on Vico's *New Science*, paragraph 378 and, specifically, about that which is "beyond our power." He writes, "We as moderns live only on the surface of our bodies, rarely going inside them to the depths of our senses. The Cartesian 'I think' knows nothing of the body." *Knowledge of Things Human and Divine: Vico's 'New Science' and 'Finnegans Wake'* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003), 187.

Twenty years of labor were required for Vico to come to terms with the poetic wisdom of the ancients and which—*corvo e rivo*—awaits humanity at some unknown date in the future. Once the character of imaginative universals is comprehended, one can then distinguish between imaginative and rational metaphysics. The work of poetry is to evoke experience even when not being experienced, while the work of philosophy is to analyze that which is in experience and which can be separated from any given experience.

In another passage, Vico places in parallel metaphysics and poetic faculty, universals and particulars: "For metaphysics abstracts the mind from the senses, and the poetic faculty must submerge the whole mind in the senses; metaphysics soars up to universals, and the poetic faculty must plunge deep into particulars" (§1821). It is clear that Vico understands "metaphysics" in a way that is distinguished from other philosophical terms and that abstraction is part of metaphysics' special character. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that Vico's use of terms is not univocal and not even always consistent. To understand the two foregoing passages in relation to one another, "rational metaphysics" of paragraph 405 is taken to correspond to "metaphysics" in paragraph 821 and "imaginative metaphysics" to "poetic faculty." The latter passage comes from Vico's "Discovery of the True Homer" where he is chary of using the word "philosophy" in any way whatsoever with respect to Homer. The movement of metaphysics is abstraction of the "mind from the senses"; that of the poetic faculty is submergence of the "mind in the senses." Attention to prepositions and to directional movement is important in this brief quotation. Rational metaphysics leaves the senses behind, deriving the mind *from* them. Vico does not say that the poetic faculty must leave behind the mind, rather that it plunges the mind *into* the sensory realm. Rational metaphysics separates the mind from the senses, while imaginative metaphysics unites the mind with the senses. The mind collapsed into the senses yields images as the mode representing truth, which corresponds to intelligibles in rational metaphysics.

Vico elaborates the distinction between rational and imaginative metaphysics in terms of "intelligible class concepts" and "imaginative class concepts": "The first men, the children, as it were, of the human race, not being able to form intelligible class concepts of things, had a natural need to create poetic characters; that is imaginative class concepts or universals, to which, as to certain models or ideal portraits, to reduce all the particular species which

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resembled them" (§209). What does Vico mean by "imaginative class concepts"? Just before this passage, he gives the example of the child who in the early period of speaking learns the name of one thing and then uses that name to name every similar thing (§206). Drawing out this insight, one can say of the toddler, having learned that the man she knows best is "Papa" and the woman, "Mama," shortly thereafter regards all adult males as "papa" and all adult females as "mama," until she learns further distinctions. At this early stage of the child's development, "papa" and "mama" are common nouns, denoting imaginative genera, which is to say that they are not concepts at all, properly speaking (that is, in terms of ratiocination). Imaginative genera are images that signify categories without forming an abstract concept separate from the image. The rational thinker can think "man" without thinking of a man. The imaginative thinker thinks only the image "papa" without a separate rational concept.

Aristotle allows for the possibility of imaginative universals in poetry when he contrasts poetry with history. He observes that a versified Herodotus would still be history, because poetry is more than verse.¹⁴ He elaborates the point: "Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do—which is the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to the characters; by a singular statement, one as to what, say, Alcibiades did or had done to him."¹⁵ What confuses the superficial reader of poetry is that there are all those nouns, proper and common, which seem to denote specific things (that is, concrete particulars). Even when there is a correspondence between the noun and the thing, poetry is saying something universal rather than something merely particular. Herodotus's Darius is a particular king; Homer's Odysseus is a universal hero. Aristotle's claim, of course, is subject to challenge, but what seems clear is that he allows for the possibility of a preconceptual or nonconceptual universal. Poets as well as toddlers may mean "any man" when they say "papa."

Here is the argument: Vico holds that there are imaginative universals in Homer to which the rational universals of philosophers correspond. To identify proper concepts in the Homeric

14. Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2:2316-40, 2:2223.

15. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 2:2323.

texts is nothing other than anachronistic projection of something, namely concepts, which did not exist until well after the terminus ad quem of the components of the Homeric corpus, that is, no later than 680 BCE.¹⁶

Poetry and Philosophy Born in Ignorance and Wonder

Repeatedly, Vico argues that what Homer and all other ancient poetic wisdom depict is given rational and abstract expression by philosophers. Paragraph 375 warrants discussion with respect to ignorance and wonder as the origins of both poetry and philosophy.

Hence poetic wisdom, the first wisdom of the gentle world, must have begun with a metaphysics not rational and abstract like that of learned men now, but felt and imagined as that of these first men must have been, who, without the power of ratiocination, were all robust sense and vigorous imagination. This metaphysics was their poetry, a faculty born with them (for they were furnished by nature with senses and imaginations); born of their ignorance of causes, for ignorance, the mother of wonder, made everything wonderful to men who were ignorant of everything. (§375)

Vico adds two paragraphs later, "And thus they began to exercise that natural curiosity which is the daughter of ignorance and the mother of knowledge, and which, opening the mind of man, gives birth to wonder" (§377). Wonder is equally the starting point for both poetic and philosophical metaphysics. With the same point of departure, poetic metaphysics arises from the imagination as the primary human faculty for apprehending the world, while philosophical metaphysics arises from the intellect as the primary human faculty for apprehending the world. Both kinds of metaphysics seek first causes but express their explanations respectively in terms of imaginative or rational genera.

In this view, Vico stands very near Aristotle, who observes toward the beginning of the *Metaphysics*:

For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e.g. about the phenomena

of the moon and those of the sun and the stars, and about the genesis of the universe. And a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant (whence even the lover of myth [*philomythos*] is in a sense a lover of wisdom [*philosophos*], for myth is composed of wonders); therefore . . . they were pursuing science in order to know, and not for any utilitarian end.¹⁷

For Aristotle, wonder yields to ignorance which, in turn, yields to philosophy, either rational or mythological. The views of Aristotle and Vico are not quite identical. They do not agree as to which comes first, wonder or ignorance, for example. If Vico had this passage of Aristotle in mind, he does not indicate it. They do agree that ignorance and wonder are preambles to an attempt without a "utilitarian end" to explain the world, either as philosophy proper or as myth. Aristotle is prepared to see myth as depiction which expresses what he sought to express rationally, as he points out a few pages later. He discusses how makers of myths were seeking to understand primary causes just as philosophers did at a later period, though he distances himself from the view, as he often does, with the formula: "There are some who think" and "Some think that the ancients who lived long before the present generation, and first framed accounts of the gods, had a similar view of nature; for they made Ocean and Tethys the parents of creation, and described the oath of the gods as being by water, which they themselves called Styx; for what is oldest is most honourable, and the most honourable thing is that by which one swears."¹⁸ The makers of myth were engaged in imaginative speculation which prefigured rational speculation. This reading of Aristotle is further reinforced by what Walter Kaufmann calls among "the most famous sentences in the *Poetics*" (referring to 1451b5-9).¹⁹ Aristotle recognizes that poetry is about universals. He is not willing to say that they are philosophical universals, nor does he probe the universal character of poetic imagery in the way that Vico does exhaustively. He simply states the recognition that universals are expressed in poetry. Taken with the two passages from the *Metaphysics*, one can draw out his thinking on this point. Poetic mythology and philosophy proper both attend to the same reality and ponder that reality in universal terms. There is no doubt

17. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2:1552-1728, 2:1554.

18. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 2:1556.

19. Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 41. Reading Kaufmann on this point is fruitful; he discusses "the philosophical dimension" of poetry. *Tragedy and Philosophy*, 92-101; see also Vico, ¶¶809-12.

16. The view of Eric Voegelin is adopted here; see *The World of the Polis*, ed. Athanasios Moulakis (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2000), 139.

that Aristotle sees the philosophic enterprise as superior and superseding to mythology, but just as clearly he sees that he and Homer work from the same ignorance born of wonder in search of first causes.²⁰ Vico writes what might be read as a response or an addition to Aristotle, "The greater the object of wonder, the more the wonder grows" (§1184).

The comparison of Aristotle and Vico provides a basis to show where Plato both agrees and disagrees with them. Socrates of the *Theaetetus* says, "For this is an experience which is characteristic of a philosopher, this wondering: this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else. And the man who made Iris the child of Thamus was perhaps no bad genealogist."²¹ Implicitly, Socrates praises Hesiod here who presents such a genealogy. "Thamus" means "wonder."²² Mythology is born of the same wonder as philosophy. In that, Socrates of the *Theaetetus* agrees with Aristotle and, speaking diachronically, with Vico as well. Absent is a passage in Plato parallel to Aristotle's recognition that poetry speaks of universals. Plato employs mythology even while he rejects poetry. Aristotle affirms both mythology and poetry as analogues to and superseded by philosophy.

Depiction and Conceptualization

Vico gives specific examples of poetic depictions that prefigure philosophical conceptualizations. One such is particularly valuable in its allusion to the monumental work of Descartes:

The metaphysics of the philosophers, by means of the idea of God, fulfills its first task, that of clarifying the human mind, which needs logic so that with clear and distinct ideas it may shape reasonings, and descend therewith to cleanse the heart of

20. Nancy du Bois Marcus is correct when she asserts, "The centrality Plato gives Homer as a rival educator distinguishes him from Aristotle, for example, for whom the quarrel between philosophy and poetry is not definitive of his own conception of philosophy. Aristotle takes as his starting point not Homer but other philosophers." *Vico and Plato* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 222. In addition, it must be said that, for Aristotle, there is no "quarrel." Philosophy and poetry alike are created in the search for universals. While Homer is not the recurring theme for Aristotle as he is for Plato, nevertheless Aristotle does take Homer seriously and does pronounce that Homer in both his mythology and his poetry anticipated the work undertaken by philosophy.

21. Socrates is playing on the derivation of Thamus (*Thamus*) for the Greek word for wonder, *to thaimin*. Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. M. J. Levett, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 157–134, 173.

22. See Plato, *Theaetetus*, 173a12.

man with morality. Just so the metaphysics of the poet giants, who had warred against heaven in their atheism, vanquished them with the terror of love, whom they feared as the wielder of the thunderbolt. And it humbled not only their bodies but their minds as well, by creating in them this frightful idea of love. (The idea of course, was not shaped by reasoning, for they were not yet capable of that, but by the senses, which, however false in the matter, were true enough in their form—which was the logic conformable to such natures as theirs.) (§1502)

Here Vico provides a clear scheme of the relationships among metaphysics, logic, and morality.²³ His special interest is to show how both philosophers and poets respectively express metaphysics, logic, and morality, and then how those two expressions correspond to each other. The form of imaginative metaphysics is the form of rational metaphysics; it is the matter of the two which differs. The matter in poetic metaphysics is the sensible (for example, the sound and feeling of thunder, the sight of lightning);

23. Descartes's last work, *Les passions de l'ame* (The passions of the soul) (1649), was a kind of ethics based upon his "clear and distinct ideas," in which he seeks to order human passions according to reason in a way analogous to training a good bird dog. He concludes "Part One" of that treatise: "These things are worth noting in order to encourage each of us to make a point of controlling our passions. For since we are able, with a little effort, to change the movements of the brain in animals devoid of reason, it is clear that we can do so still more effectively in the case of men. Even those who have the weakest souls could acquire absolute mastery over all their passions if we employed sufficient ingenuity in training and guiding them." *The Passions of the Soul*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), 1:325–404, 1:348. Vico, by contrast, gives expression of how logic is the governing principle that both frames "clear and distinct ideas" and then cleanses "the heart of man." One wonders if he has in mind here Aristotle's *orthos logos*, which is one of the pervasive principles of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For example, "to de meson esin hos ho logos ho orthos logos" (the mean then is as right *logos* declares). Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), 324. For Vico, the heart, seat of the passions, needs not merely to be ordered, but to be "cleansed." Vico also makes explicit that he regards a true ethics as impossible from the defective metaphysics of Descartes and others. He writes, "For the metaphysics of the philosophers must agree with the metaphysics of the poets, on this most important point, that from the idea of a divinity have come all the sciences that have enriched the world with all the arts of humanity; just as this vulgar [poetic] metaphysic taught men lost in the bestial state to form the first human thought from that of love, so the learned must not admit any truth in metaphysics that does not begin from true *Being*, which is God. And René Descartes certainly would have recognized this, if he had noticed it in the very dubitation that he makes of his own being." Donald Phillip Vereen, "Gianbattista Vico's 'Reprentension of the Metaphysics of René Descartes,' Benedict Spinoza, and John Locke": An Addition to the *New Science* (Translation and Commentary), *New Vico Studies* 8 (1990): 2–18, 2.

and in rational metaphysics, the intelligible (for example, "the idea of God"). Form (logic) shapes the phantasms of the poetic metaphysicians just as it shapes the thoughts of the rational metaphysicians. Donald Phillip Verene argues that "Vico's ideas constitute a philosophy of recollective universals which generates philosophical understanding from the image, not from the rational category."²⁴ He further clarifies his understanding of Vico: "Images or *universalis fantasia* are not . . . simply concepts in poetic cloaks. The image is not to be understood in relation to the concept. The image is to be understood on its own terms."²⁵ As is clear from paragraph 502, "clear and distinct ideas" correspond analogously to poetic images, rather than being juxtaposed to them. The whole scheme of Vico's thought hangs on the three ages, of gods, of heroes, and of men, a paradigm that implies correspondence among the three ages, something he makes explicit in his eleven "triadic special unities."²⁶ The poetic metaphysicians arise in the age of the gods and continue in the age of the heroes. For example, in the encounter between Polyphemus and Odysseus,²⁷ one sees depicted the heroic age superseding the divine age. Rational metaphysics arises in the age of men.

Taking the use of "clear and distinct ideas" as an implicit reference to Descartes, the present interpretation is that Vico embraces Descartes's genius, but insists on conjunction (reason and imagination) exactly where Descartes insists on disjunction (reason to the exclusion of imagination).²⁸ As analysis of this

24. Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981), 19.

25. Verene, *Vico's Science*, 33. He later elucidates this point, "If we as modern thinkers form concepts in terms of intelligible genera, how did the first men think such that our manner of concept formation can be understood as developing from a first form of thought? This question can be regarded as stating the philosophical side of Vico's philosophical-philological method" (73).

26. Vico discusses "the successive ages of gods, heroes and men." Those three ages "develop . . . by a constant and uninterrupted order of causes and effects present in every nation" through the eleven triadic unities: three kinds of "natures," "customs," "natural laws," "civil states or commonwealths," "languages," "written characters of language, jurisprudence," "authority," "reason," "judgments," and "times" (that is, the fashions of the age) (Vico, ¶915). These unities are adumbrated in paragraphs 915-79. For example, customs in the age of the gods, the age of heroes, and the age of men are analogous. X is in the divine age as Y is in the heroic age and as Z is in the human age.

27. Homer, *Odyssey*, 9.105-565.

28. Descartes, for example, attributes failure to believe in God to "the images of sensible things . . . besieging my thought from all directions." Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in Cress, *Meditations on First Philosophy and Discourse on Method*, 46-92, 91. In fact, imagination is not even necessary for "me" to be what "I am." He writes of the

passage, Vico saw the great peril in Cartesian rationality, which begins by excluding everything except his one indubitable truth of rationality, "I think, therefore I am."²⁹ First, it excluded the imagination and regarded the senses as unreliable at best, and second, once imagination was excluded from the operations of the intellect, there was the danger of someone picking up the imagination as the exclusive human faculty of apprehending the world. In Thomistic and, indeed, Aristotelian epistemology, while the intellect is the ruling human faculty, it fully embraces the operations of the senses and the imagination.³⁰ By contrast with Thomas Aquinas, Descartes isolates the intellect from the imagination and the senses. While appreciating the genius of Descartes, Vico expresses reservations. First, in order for a metaphysics of clear and distinct ideas to be a complete metaphysics, it must imply an ethics ("it may shape reasonings, and descend therewith to cleanse the heart of man with morality"). Second, a metaphysics of clear and distinct ideas (that is, a rational metaphysics) has its analogue in a metaphysics of poetic images ("just so the metaphysics of the poet giants"). By further inference, a poetic metaphysics is superior to the rational metaphysics if it yields an ethics while the rational metaphysics does not. Patrick J. Deneen summarizes Vico's analysis of the encounter between Odysseus and Polyphemus, "Irrational myth leads to morality."³¹ Every metaphysics must be judged by the morality it produces. Vico argues for the conjunction of the two analogous metaphysics of intellect and imagination against the disjunction that arises from Cartesian thought, namely a metaphysics either of the intellect or of the imagination. Not only are they conjoined, says Vico, but they are in fact successive in the ages of gods, heroes, and men, repeated throughout all ages in all countries and cultures.

As Vico observes in the passage just quoted, as there is a poetic metaphysics, there is also a poetic logic. He elaborates that point later:

imagination, "For were I to be lacking this power, I would nevertheless undoubtedly remain the same entity I am now." Descartes, *Meditations*, 93.

29. Descartes, *Discourse*, 18.

30. For a summary of Thomas Aquinas's epistemology, see John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 2000), 35-42.

31. Patrick J. Deneen, *The Odyssey of Political Theory: The Politics of Departure and Return* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 173.

That which is metaphysics insofar as it contemplates things in all the forms of their being is logic insofar as it considers things in all the forms by which they may be signified. Accordingly, as poetry has been considered by us above as a poetic metaphysics in which the theological poets imagined bodies to be for the most part divine substances, so now that same poetry is considered as poetic logic, by which it signifies them. (§1400)

The division of the speculative sciences by Aquinas is a useful tool in analyzing this passage.³² He observes that there are three speculative sciences: physics, mathematics, and metaphysics. The objects of physics exist in matter and in motion and are understood in matter and motion. The objects of metaphysics do not need matter or motion to exist or to be understood. If one thinks of the world divided in terms of metaphysical objects and physical objects, then mathematics emerges from the boundary between the two. Mathematics faces toward physics insofar as the objects of its study exist in matter and motion and toward metaphysics insofar as the objects of its study do not need matter or motion to be understood. A new boundary then exists between metaphysics and mathematics. What emerges from that boundary is logic, which is the science of signifying that which is. Metaphysics is the science of the being that logic signifies. Vico affirms that just as there is a poetic logic that corresponds to rational logic, there is a poetic metaphysics that corresponds to rational metaphysics.

Aquinas's analysis of the three speculative sciences also provides a fitting preamble prior to surveying the relationship of imagination to reason (or, properly said in regard to Aquinas's division, to intellect, since reason is in motion what the intellect is in rest)³³ in the history of philosophy. In Aquinas's epistemology, imagination is both integral and subordinate to intellect. Imagination stands between the senses and the intellect, mediating and sorting sensory data, forming phantasms that are fed to the intellect for

32. Thomas Aquinas, *The Division and Method of the Sciences*, trans. and intro. Armand Maurer, 4th rev. ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1999), 12–15.

33. Armand Maurer explains, "For St. Thomas, reason and intellect are not really distinct powers of man. They are one and the same intellectual power by which we know in different ways. Through reason we move from the known to the unknown, advancing from one thing to another in our conquest of truth. Through intellect we grasp an intelligible truth simply and intuitively, without any movement or discourse of the mind. So the act of reason is compared to that of intellect as movement to rest, or as the reaching out for something to the actual possession of it." Introduction to *Division and Method*, xxxiii.

analysis. The intellect also tests and corrects the imagination and the other lower faculties through reflection. In such a scheme, it would be nonsensical to say that a person thought with the imagination. As physics terminates in the senses, and metaphysics in the intellect, nothing higher than a mathematical object can terminate in the imagination. The idea of correspondence between imagination and intellect simply has no place.³⁴ For Descartes, it is reason in action, that is to say thinking, which is primary, but he has replaced metaphysics with mathematics as first philosophy.³⁵ David Hume, the younger contemporary of Vico, also reacting against Descartes, does not dispense with the senses or reason but understands them as weaker partners to the imagination, his famous theater of the mind.³⁶ In contrast to the treatment by other thinkers, Vico's originality stands in bold relief. He rejects neither imagination nor reason; he does not subordinate the one to the other. Vico insists that in the different ages, imagination and reason are equally capable of abstracting universals from particulars—in one case imaginative universals and in the other rational universals—and, further, that rational and imaginative universals correspond to one another.³⁷

The modern reader is tempted to ask if Homeric likenesses are not merely metaphors. To that question Vico gives a nuanced answer. From the following passage, distinctions shall be noted that establish Vico's analysis of the relationship between imaginative and rational genera and, further, that philosophers received their ontological paradigm from Homer. Vico defines metaphor as a trope in poetic logic:

The most luminous and therefore the most necessary and frequent [trope] is metaphor. It is most praised when it gives

34. This discussion of Thomistic epistemology follows that of Whipple's in *Metaphysical Thoughts of Thomas Aquinas*.

35. For example, Descartes writes, "Only mathematicians have been able to find any demonstrations, that is to say, certain and evident reasonings." *Discourse*, 11. He discusses the certainty of God's existence in terms of a triangle's certainty. Demonstrations in geometry are certain, while those of metaphysics are not. Again, he emphasizes "reason" over and against "imagination" and "senses." Descartes, *Discourse*, 20–22.

36. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 165.

37. Vico discusses the traditional role of imagination in philosophy. "Traditionally in philosophy the imagination has been the handmaiden of the concept." Vico, *Vico's Science*, 33–34. That is true of Platonic, Aristotelian, Thomistic, and Kantian philosophy, but not of Hume or of French irrationalism.

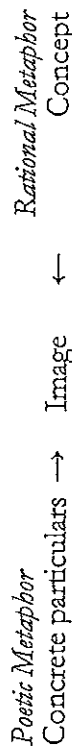
sense and passion to insensate things, in accordance with the metaphysics discussed above, by which the first poets attributed to bodies the being of animate substances, with capacities measured by their own, namely sense and passion, and in this way made fables of them. Thus every metaphor so formed is a fable in brief. This gives basis for judging the time when metaphors made their appearance in the languages. All the metaphors conveyed by likenesses taken from bodies to signify the operations of abstract minds must date from times when philosophies were taking shape. ¶(404)

Vico writes of metaphor in the singular, but a careful reading of this passage reveals that there are actually two kinds of metaphor or, at very least, two different operations that arrive at metaphor: poetic metaphor and rational metaphor. Poetic metaphor "gives sense and passion to insensate things." Thus, the insensate thing "sky" was given "sense and passion" as "Jove," "sea" as "Nep-tune." The same principle applies to many particular things. All flowers are "Flora," and all fruits "Pomona" (Vico, ¶(402)).³⁸ This is the operation of imaginative abstraction whereby an animate being, in fact some form of deity, is a concrete particular or the sum of many concrete particulars. This is Vico's poetic metaphor: The sky is Jove. "The sky is Jove" is only metaphorical, however, to those for whom it is no longer an adequate expression of a state of affairs. This is Vico's analysis of mythology's personification of nature. When "the sky is Jove" was taught from parent to child (or grandparent to grandchild), it was believed to express accurately an actual state of affairs. Vico understood that. As a statement of analysis by one who no longer held that view, Vico explains that the operation of poetic metaphor is the imaginative abstraction of things. The operation of poetic metaphor is from the concrete particular to an imaginative genus which is that particular. The sky cloudy, the sky clear, the sky by night, and the sky by day is always Jove. This flower that blossomed today and will wilt tomorrow, that flower that has been in bloom for a week, and all other flowers that are, ever have been, and ever shall be, rose, violet, crocus, tulip, and the rest are all Flora. The image, "Jove" or "Flora," is the concrete particular.³⁹

38. As he works toward his explication of metaphor in paragraph 404, Vico discusses how Jove becomes an imaginative universal (¶379). Such imaginative universals hold as much for heroes as for gods. "Achilles connotes an idea of valor common to all strong men, or Ulysses an idea of prudence common to all wise men" (¶403).

39. This understanding is very near to that of Verene when he writes, "Poetic characters are particulars that function as universals, that is, for the ages of gods and

Vico observes a second kind of metaphor that operates in the opposite direction. It is the metaphor "conveyed by likenesses taken from bodies to signify the operations of abstract minds." This is rational metaphor, and it is also metaphor as the word is ordinarily used from Aristotle on. Distinguishing rational metaphor from the operation of poetic metaphor, Vico writes, "We nowadays reverse this practice in respect of spiritual things, such as the faculties of the human mind, the passions, virtues, vices, sciences, and arts; for the most part the ideas we form of them are so many female personifications" (¶402). Rational metaphor states a concept in terms of the image of a concrete particular. When Boethius, for example, wanted to write about all of philosophy taken together, he invented Lady Philosophy and gave her voice. He did not, however, believe in the existence of Lady Philosophy in the way that many once believed in the existence of Jove. To summarize, poetic metaphor expresses concrete particulars in terms of an image, while rational metaphor expresses concepts in terms of an image. What the two kinds of metaphor have in common is that both move toward the image, but they arrive at the image from opposite directions, respectively of concrete particulars and concepts, as can be seen in the following diagram.



This analysis draws out points made by Vico. He did actually distinguish between the two movements toward metaphor. It would have been helpful had he given them two different names. Vico's poetic metaphor, concrete particulars expressed as an image, shall be called "imaginative genus" or "imaginative abstraction" or "imaginative universal."⁴⁰ What Vico argues—and

heroes they accomplish what class concepts accomplish for the third age of purely human or logical thought. Universality of the imagination uses a particular as a universal." *Knowledge of Things Human and Divine*, 183. It seems clear that Vico and Verene in his interpretation do not merely mean that "poetic characters . . . function as universals" (emphasis added), but that they also are the universals. In Vico, paragraph 209, which Verene uses to illustrate his point, Vico calls the "poetic characters" "imaginative class concepts or universals." Verene, in his explanation of poetic characters as universals, writes, "Achilles, whom we grasp as a particular figure, not a property or attribute, is univocally predicated of diverse individuals. These individuals are not analogous to Achilles, not like Achilles, each of them literally is Achilles." Verene, *Knowledge of Things Human and Divine*, 184.

40. Verene's discussion in his chapter, "Imaginative Universals," is helpful; see Vico's

his point is adopted here—is that rational abstraction in the philosophers corresponds to imaginative abstraction in Homer. The special addition made here is to argue further that Homeric imaginative abstractions provide the ontological paradigm from which philosophers developed rational abstraction. What is depicted in Homer is conceptualized in philosophy.

One way to understand more clearly the movement toward image is to reflect upon the use of myth by Plato. It has been said above that the imaginative speculation of myth prefigured rational speculation. Thus, in terms of historical development, myth precedes and—the claim is made here—creates the problematic for philosophy. Plato creates myth, however, after rational speculation.⁴¹ The Myth of Er, for example, is the last word in *The Republic* (c. 360 BCE). Plato uses myth as a metaphor for the rational speculation that precedes it. Even when myth does not constitute the final word of a dialogue, myth is meant to express rational conception. Homeric myth presents imaginative genera as expressions of concrete experience. Platonic myth is metaphor for rational speculation.

Vico also wants to make absolutely clear how profoundly he disagrees with what he believes to have been Plato's reading of Homer. The distinction of imaginative genus and metaphor proper provides the basis for understanding why Vico was so adamant on this point. For Vico, Homer did not possess esoteric wisdom. "For the wisdom of the ancients was the vulgar wisdom of the lawgivers who founded the human race, not the esoteric wisdom of great and rare philosophers" (§1384). It has already been observed that Mazzotta holds Vico to have been wrong in his assessment of Plato's esoteric reading of Homer. It might be asked how different Vico's view of Homer was from Plato's. Deneen comments that "despite the claim that he disagrees with Plato—indeed, to attribute unreflective admiration of Homer's wisdom to Plato is at best disingenuous on Vico's part—Vico proceeds with a critique

Scienza, 65–95, especially 74–80. It is the view of the present study that 1) imaginative universals are not "proto-conceptual," but rather are "pre-conceptual," which means that 2) they precede concepts historically rather than preceding concepts psychologically, and, moreover, 3) imaginative universals in one age correspond to rational universals in another age, and 4) imaginative and rational abstraction are in each paradigm the matter shaped by form (see discussion of Vico's §502 on pages 348–51). The view of this work seems to be in agreement with Verene when he writes, "Vico's philosophical-philological method depends upon the power of *fantasia* to think particulars in universal form." Verene, *Vico's Science*, 109.

41. Joshua P. Hochschild, note to author, November 15, 2007.

of the Homeric epics that shares a great deal in common with Plato's critique both in the *Republic* and the *Apology*."⁴² It is not clear that Vico attributed "unreflecting admiration of Homer's wisdom to Plato," rather that he characterized Plato's reading of Homer as distinguishing between an exoteric and esoteric meaning, and that Plato found in that esoteric reading an anticipation of the questions that occupied him (that is, Plato) as a philosopher.⁴³ Whether Plato did actually thus characterize Homer remains an open question. What Deneen observes correctly is the great similarity between the way Vico characterizes (and criticizes) Plato's reading of Homer and Vico's own reading of Homer. Vico accuses Plato of finding esoteric wisdom in Homer. Vico says that the imaginative metaphysics of Homer prefigure the rational metaphysics of the philosophers. What is the difference between the two characterizations?⁴⁴

The difference is the same kind as was observed in Vico's discussion of metaphor. Recalling the distinction already made between imaginative genus and metaphor proper, Vico is saying that Homer wrote in imaginative genera while Plato found in Homer philosophical metaphor. For Vico, Homer abstracted imaginatively from the world of particulars, while, according to Vico's reading of Plato, Plato found in Homer the images of concepts.⁴⁵

42. Deneen, *Odyssey of Political Theory*, 175.

43. Vico's paragraph 780 has already been quoted in which he states, "as Plato left firmly fixed the opinion that Homer was endowed with sublime esoteric wisdom (and all the other philosophers have followed in his train)." It is against the supposition that Homer was a philosopher, established by Plato, that Vico argues. As an example, Vico discusses Cypriotean barbarism as an explicit theme that Plato (and Aristotle as well) take from Homer (Vico, §1950, §1962, §1982, §11005).

44. Seth Bernardete does not cite Vico, but he reflects upon this same point: "The poets' wisdom was vulgar wisdom. . . . If, however, there had been this constant anticipation in the poets of what Plato made explicit, it seemed one would have to resort to the notion that the poets said many beautiful things but did not know what they meant (*Apology of Socrates*, 22c2–3). . . . An occasional hit can well be artless, but a pattern of success makes one suspect that the dice are loaded. If they are loaded, but a pattern of separation of poetry from philosophy is no longer possible." Introduction to *The Bow and the Lyre: A Platonic Reading of the Odyssey* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), xi–xii.

45. Marcus discusses Vico's understanding of Plato's reading of Homer against her own understanding of Vico's reading of Homer (see, for example, *Vico and Plato*, 30–31). Where the present interpretation seems to differ from hers is the emphasis here that what Vico criticizes in Plato's reading is Plato's movement to image from universal concept rather than Homer's movement from particulars to universal image.

What seems clear is that Vico is correct, at least, about the modern reading of Plato's reading of Homer and indeed about the modern reading of Homer himself. The modern reader finds it difficult to think that when Homer says that the sky is Zeus, he could be speaking other than metaphorically, and this is metaphor in the post-Platonic sense, that is, the movement from ratiocination to image, whereas for Homer the movement is from concrete particulars to image. Thus, on Vico's account, Homer is profoundly misunderstood by the modern who reads Homer through Plato at least in this sense. The results of this analysis call for not only a new reading of Homer, but a new reading of Plato's relationship to Homer. Vico asserts that everyone since Plato has read, at least implicitly, Homer through Plato. The task now is to invert the relationship of the two authors and to attempt to read Plato through Homer. That endeavor will permit the examination of a larger claim, namely, that Homer, by establishing an imaginative metaphysics, created the philosophical problematic that Plato refigured in terms of rational concepts.

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