

## VICO'S THEORY OF ALLEGORY

In a brief appendix to the 1730 edition of the *Scienza nuova* Vico says that one could compile a number of indexes, each representing a separate aspect of every important idea that he had advanced in that work, as an editorial aid for readers interested in searching it very quickly. Ten of the potential indexes that he had in mind, four of which were of a philosophical and six of a philological nature, seemed to him especially important, and he briefly illustrated them by presenting the same item—the idea of Jupiter—from each of the perspectives in which the indexes would have to be grounded. With the help of these indexical routes, the busy reader who had already studied the text could quickly go through the complex philosophical and philological configuration of the *Scienza nuova*, identify by simple inspection the essential aspects of Vico's thought, quickly retrieve them separately, and examine them as parts of a systematic whole. The theoretical basis of the indexes was therefore constituted by a set of analytical categories capable of capturing the essence of Vico's thought and of defining the thematic range to which his science could be applied. In so far as it is possible to view it from the multiple vantage points represented by its philosophical and philological discoveries, Vico's science of humanity could be described in turn as a science of each of the areas of research demarcated by the indexes.

Among the philological indexes, Vico includes one called "Indice delle allegorie univoche," which, if compiled, would refer the reader to all the characters and fables whose true meaning Vico reveals by shining the light of his science on them. Allegory, in other words, was so clearly central to Vico's project that, to the extent that it was a philological science, his science was also a science of univocal allegories.<sup>1</sup> We

---

<sup>1</sup>The indexes are described in *Correzioni, miglioramenti ed aggiunte quarte* (ca.1733), paragraphs 1473-1486, in *La scienza nuova, giusta l'edizione del 1744 con le varianti dell'edizione del 1730 e di due redazioni intermedie inedite*, a cura di Fausto Nicolini (Bari: Laterza, 1928). All textual references by paragraph number are to this edition of the *Scienza nuova* and its variants. The complete list of indexes is the following: *Indice de' principi*, *Indice dell'origini*, *Indice delle nature*, *Indice dell'eternità le quali escono da sé fatte nature*, *Indice delle mitologie istoriche*, *Indice delle allegorie univoche*, *Indice delle frasi poetiche che spiegavano i concetti con verità*, *Indice dell'etimologie che portano istorie di cose*, *Indice delle tradizioni volgari vagliate dal falso*, *Indice dell'identitadi in sostanza e delle modificazioni diverse*.

shall presently return to the idea of univocity mentioned in Vico's description of the allegorical index; for now it is important to insist on the fact that allegory was one of the ten areas of research in which Vico thought he had made a substantive contribution. Of course, the fact that the indexes remained a pure hypothesis cannot be regarded as evidence to the contrary, for Vico decided against compiling them for reasons of convenience. The indexes would have made the volume much thicker, and Vico had "né la pazienza, né il tempo, né la voglia" to compile them (SN 1486). Besides, he reasoned, though potentially useful, such indexes were not at all necessary, for readers willing to study the text with care do not require any analytical lists of its contents, while those who do not intend to go through the whole text in the first place would hardly find such lists sufficient. What is significant is not the practical aid represented by the indexes for the hurried reader but the categories on which they would have to be based, for these describe the conceptual parameters of Vico's science, as was illustrated by his single example. Indeed, one can argue, as Vico must have argued, not even that example is necessary to readers who have carefully studied the whole of the *Scienza nuova*, and so, in preparing the 1744 edition, Vico removed even his awkward appendix from the text.

We therefore do not have an index of univocal allegories, and that, given the scant attention that Vico has received as a thinker concerned with allegory, is most unfortunate. Had we had such an index, we might have been reminded more forcefully of the centrality of allegory in the text of the *Scienza nuova*. To be sure the *dipintura*, which stands outside the text as a complex emblematic allegory of the work as a synchronic whole, has attracted the attention of a number of serious scholars,<sup>2</sup> who, from different perspectives, have all pointed out its significance, despite the fact that abridged editions of the *Scienza nuova* have been routinely published without it. But Vico's concern with allegory in the body of the text, his explicit reflections on the concept of allegory itself, and his references to allegorical cognitive forms in his description of the central categories of his philosophy are generally given no

---

<sup>2</sup>See especially Mario Papini, *Il geroglifico della storia: Significato e funzione della dipintura nella Scienza nuova di G.B. Vico* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1984); Margherita Frankel, "The 'Dipintura' and the Structure of Vico's *New Science* as a Mirror of the World," in *Vico: Past and Present*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981), pp. 43-51; Angus Fletcher, "On the Syncretic Allegory of the *New Science*," *New Vico Studies* IV (1986), pp. 25-43; Franco Lanza, "Sinossi allegorica della *Scienza nuova*," in *Contributi dell'Istituto di filologia moderna, serie italiana*, Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Milano: Società editrice Vita e pensiero, 1961), pp. 99-135; Enzo Paci, *Ingens sylva* (Milano: 1949), pp. 179-220.

more than an incidental remark if they are not passed over in silence altogether by Vico scholars. The inhibiting power of Romantic and Neo-Idealistic aesthetics, with its declared hostility to all forms of allegory, has been of such magnitude as to cause mainstream Vico scholarship to blur out of focus the role of allegory in the *Scienza nuova*.

Vico, however, had no doubts as to the significance of what he had to say on the subject. Briefly stated, his thesis is the following: (i) As a thought form based on imaginative universals and hence as a signifying structure grasping both the general and the particular, (ii) univocal allegory is the basis of mythical narration and (iii) the principle of all poetic etymology, as well as an essential aspect of poetic language, understood, chiefly but not exclusively, as the language of the poetic ages of history. As a consequence of this, allegory is also (iv) an integral part of poetic theory, and (v) the chief principle of historical hermeneutics. My purpose in this paper is to provide evidence, both textual and inferential, for this thesis and to examine in detail Vico's arguments in each of its five parts.

As a way of approaching the subject, let us recall that for Vico the question of allegory concerns first of all the study of myth, in which context he recognizes the existence of two types of allegory, one philosophical and the other historical. Philosophical allegory is what Plato sought to identify in ancient myths, regarded by him as textual carriers of a concealed philosophy, which however could be extracted from them and made plain in the conceptual language of the interpreter. Plato's hermeneutical operation was for Vico not unlike the one rehearsed by Manethus on hieroglyphic script, which he regarded as the carrier of a mystical philosophy invisible to the populace but discernible to the skilled interpreter (128). By philosophical allegory Vico therefore means what, in the ages of reason, including his own, was generally understood by the term allegory, namely a text constructed so as to exhibit a semantic surface that is radically different from its semantic interior. A concise definition of this type of allegory had been given centuries before by Isidore of Seville in the *Etymologiae* (I, 37, 22), where the Greek term is rendered as *alieniloquium*, that is to say a form of speech which means something foreign to what it actually says. The purpose of the interpreter in the case of philosophical allegory is consequently first to show the discontinuity between the exterior and interior of the text and then to reformulate its interior with the aid of a critical and philosophical vocabulary. Vico does not discuss this type of allegory, other than to reject it as a structural model of ancient myths.

Historical allegory is instead the kind that Vico himself is generally engaged in identifying in his efforts to uncover the true meaning of ancient myths, the characters and narrative structures of which he sees as a function of the preoccupations and cognitive abilities of primitive

people. Read as a historical allegory, the myth of Prometheus narrates how at the dawn of civilization men brought down fire from the mountain tops, on which the Sky was thought to rest its gigantic body while reigning over the earth (64). The purpose of the interpreter in the case of historical allegory is to strip away from the ancient story any foreign layers of meaning that may have been superimposed on it by misguided philosophical allegorists and to show that, when it is placed in its true context of origin in the history of mind and in the history of social institutions, its narrative surface exhibits completely its true and only meaning. Historical allegory therefore describes a structure of signification to which primitive men had recourse in their effort to make sense of and to describe their perception of reality. It is the only kind of allegory with which Vico is concerned on a theoretical level.

The key to historical allegory is none other than the “chiave maestra” to the *Scienza nuova* as a whole, the one idea on which Vico spent most of his philosophical life (“ci ha costato la ricerca ostinata di quasi tutta la nostra vita letteraria,” 34), namely the premise that our ancient forefathers spoke by means of poetic characters or imaginative genera. With the aid of these thought-forms, they gave themselves a satisfactory understanding of natural phenomena and then narrated to themselves the civil history that ensued from the acquisition of such knowledge. The tales in which we find the poetic characters of the divine and heroic ages of history, when the ancient myths were created, are true accounts of the way in which those who told them understood their own existence in relation to the scheme of things as that scheme was apparent to them. The myths (favole) of ancient Greece were therefore “favelle vere”, that is to say instances of truthful speech, and they were inevitably structured as historical allegories. In the *Idea dell'opera* Vico informs his readers that in the actual text of the book that structure is made quite plain:

e se ne scuoprono l'allegorie, contenenti sensi non già analoghi ma univoci, non filosofici ma storici di tali tempi de' popoli della Grecia. (“and their allegories are found to contain meanings not analogical but univocal, not philosophical but historical, of the peoples of Greece of those times” [34]).\*

This brief statement contains the essential difference between the two types of allegory: philosophical allegory signifies analogically, whereas historical allegory does so univocally. The importance of this distinction must be duly stressed, since failure to notice it results in the

---

\*Translations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, Revised Translation of the Third Edition (1744), by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1968.

assumption that the term "allegory" has only one acceptance in Vico, namely the still current one of philosophical allegory, a fact which has led into error several otherwise careful readers of the *Scienza nuova*.<sup>3</sup> The two meanings of the word allegory represent yet another instance of what Nicola Badaloni has identified as a general procedure followed by Vico, which was to begin with the current structure of a given historical object, represented by the meaning the term denoting it has in the present, and to go back in time to the structure that it must have had when it first came into being, on the premise that we can grasp the sense of historical evolution as such by studying the structural transformations undergone by individual products of the human mind, which is itself a product of history.<sup>4</sup> In the case at hand the object in question is allegory, and so we must begin with allegory as it is known in the present (philosophical allegory) and return to what allegory must have been like in the age of history (historical allegory) when it first emerged as a cognitive and signifying form.

Philosophically the distinction that Vico draws between the two types of allegory is based on a long metaphysical tradition that, since the Middle Ages, contrasted "analogia" and "univocatio" as different ways of understanding the concept of being with respect to man and God, and, consequently, as different ways of signifying it by means of this word. For St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, the term "being" had analogous rather than identical senses when applied to God and man, since the being of God is uncreated and inseparable from the essence of God whereas the being of man is created and separable from the essence of man. But for Duns Scotus, the power of whose philosophy Vico had first discovered as a young man under the guidance of the Jesuit Giuseppe Ricci, the concept of being was applied univocally to both God and man, since man had to have this much in common with God in order to have any knowledge of Him.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Beginning with Benedetto Croce, who, in *La filosofia di G.B. Vico* (Bari: Laterza, 1973; first edition, 1911), p. 64, states: "I miti o favole non contengono sapienza riposta, cioè concetti ragionati, avvolti consapevolmente nel velo della favola; e perciò non sono allegorie." For more recent examples see Alasdair MacIntyre, "Myth," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York and London: Macmillan, 1967; rpt., 1972), V, p. 435, and David Bidney, "Vico's New Science of Myth," in *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Hayden V. White (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), pp. 274-275.

<sup>4</sup>Nicola Badaloni, *Introduzione a Vico* (Bari: Laterza, 1984), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup>For a concise statement of these issues in St. Thomas and Duns Scotus, see Frederick J. Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, volume II, *Augustine to Scotus* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 353-356 and 503-506.

To the extent that Aquinas and Scotus may be considered the chief representatives of these two philosophical attitudes toward being, it follows that the metaphysical assumption behind Vico's notion of philosophical allegory is of the Thomistic type, while the one behind his notion of historical allegory is of the Scotist sort. The significance of this preference emerges more clearly when we recall that, in connection with the protracted dispute over the nature of universals, it was on the basis of the Scotist realism imparted to him by Ricci, himself "scotista di setta ma zenonista nel fondo," that Vico came to reject the nominalism of his earlier teacher Antonio del Balzo and, in addition, to discover the attraction of modern Platonism, which is closer to Scotism than to any other version of Scholasticism, as well as to see the possibility of developing a "Zenonist" metaphysics of his own.<sup>6</sup> Scotism was what linked the Scholastic tradition to the philosophical context of "renewed Platonism," as Badaloni calls it, in which Vico developed the central tenets of his own philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

A major implication of the Scotist allusion in the language of Vico's theory of allegory is that, for a given imaginative genus, the manifold species signified, in so far as they are looked at exclusively under the aspect represented by the genus, are not only nominally indistinguishable but also ontologically identical. In the genus that historians call Thrice-Great Hermes, each of the many anonymous figures signified by the same name over a period of several centuries is ontologically identical to all the others and to the first one to be called by that name: they are all made of the same being—namely the being of one in possession of such vulgar wisdom as is necessary to found a civilization—and are therefore identical. On the linguistic level this means that historical allegory transforms a proper name into a common noun, while on the metaphysical level the same operation identifies, as Badaloni puts it, "la proprietà col personaggio."<sup>8</sup> Using somewhat more technical language, we could say that in Vico's conception of historical allegory an accident, which originally inheres in a substance, is treated as if it were a substance itself. For example, the valor of Achilles is treated as if it were Achilles and is called Achilles whenever it is met in a person whose essential nature appears to be the same as that of the original Achilles. But because an accident cannot become a substance in the material sense, we must conclude that the allegorical operation gives existence only to an "ens rationis", that is to say to a substance that does not have

---

<sup>6</sup>*Autobiografia in Opere*, ed. Fausto Nicolini (Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi, 1953), pp. 3 and 6.

<sup>7</sup>Badaloni, p.27.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 88.

the being of a substance outside the mind perceiving it.

As an *ens rationis* each of the allegorical significations of a given myth is real without being material, and it is not distinguishable from the others because no non-univocally predicated attributes are involved. An allegory of this nature, Vico says revising Isidore's famous definition of philosophical allegory, is properly called a "*diversiloquium*,"<sup>9</sup> that is to say a configuration of superimposed "diversely speaking" images, since by means of a single imaginative genus allegory signifies a multiplicity of species which are separate in number and identical in substance. In commenting on axiom 49, which refers the reader to Iamblichus's presentation of Thrice-great Hermes as the figure to whom the Egyptians attributed the invention or discovery of all that is useful and necessary to human life, Vico states:

E quest'ultima degnità, in seguito dell'antecedenti, è 'l principio delle vere allegorie poetiche, che alle favole davano significati univoci, non analogi, di diversi particolari compresi sotto i loro generi poetici: le quali perciò si dissero "*diversiloquia*", cioè parlari comprendenti in un general concetto diverse spezie di uomini o fatti o cose. ("The last of these three axioms, when added to the other two, is the principle of the true poetic allegories which gave the fables univocal, not analogical, meanings for various particulars comprised under their poetic genera. They were therefore called *diversiloquia*; that is, expressions comprising in one general concept various species of men, deeds, or things" [210]).

Nor can the identity of the signified species be reduced to a mere similarity of a few characteristics, such as could indicate that the individuals to whom they belong are similarly suited to carry out equivalent parallel roles in their separate historical contexts. Species of this type would certainly be perceived as being equal in some respects, since they are related to their historical contexts in parallel ways, but they cannot be perceived as being equal in all respects, because non-univocal attributes are always involved in the perception of the separateness

---

<sup>9</sup>Vico's exact wording in paragraph 210 of the 1744 edition, "le quali [allegorie] si dissero *diversiloquia*," is somewhat unfortunate because it suggests that he borrowed this Latin term from some source that has since dropped out of currency, since his editors have failed to identify it. Thomas Bergin and Max Fisch, in their English version of *The New Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), reinforce this idea, by translating the passage as "They were therefore called *diversiloquia*." But in the 1725 edition there is no such suggestion. There Vico's words indicate rather that *diversiloquia* was the way he rendered what the Greeks must have meant by allegories: "Le significazioni di sí fatti parlari devono essere state sul lor principio propriamente le allegorie, che pur i greci con tal voce voglion dire" See *La Scienza nuova prima*, a cura di fausto Nicolini (Bari: Laterza, 1931), par. 265.

of parallelism, and therefore cannot be regarded as identical. That sort of limited functional equivalence would be no more than what Thomism knows as "*convenientia proportionis*" and modern scholarship as analogy of attribution.<sup>10</sup> It is no equality at all, not even in part, since the attribution of a given property to different entities, such as the attribution of the same (rather than the same type of) vulgar wisdom to individuals in different periods of history, is similar but not exactly the same. For Vico the identity of the signified species, rather, is total, in the sense that, to the mind perceiving them, they are fully convertible and can therefore be predicated of each other. They are, in effect, different instances of the same thing. Vico insists upon this consequence of the univocity of predication in historical allegory and is very careful to avoid any possible misinterpretation of his view as a case of the identity of proportion. In the attempt to rule out all ambiguity and to make his view crystal clear, he goes so far as to say that, in his description of historical allegory, the defining terms are to be read in the (precise and ascertainable) technical sense that they have for the Scholastic tradition. The passage in question is long, but the sense of urgency with which Vico sees the need for clarity and the number of significant details that he mentions in the process no doubt warrant its full quotation.

Quindi le mitologie devono essere state i propri parlari delle favole (che tanto suona tal voce); talché essendo le favole, come sopra si è dimostrato, generi fantastici, le mitologie devono essere state le loro proprie allegorie. Il qual nome, come si è nelle Dignità osservato, ci venne diffinito "*diversiloquium*", in quanto, con identità non di proporzione ma, per dirla alla scolastica, di predicabilità, esse significano le diverse spezie o i diversi individui compresi sotto essi generi: tanto che devon avere una significazione univoca, comprendente una ragion comune alle loro spezie o individui (come d' Achille, un'idea di valore comune a tutti i forti; come d'Ulisse, un'idea di prudenza comune a tutti i saggi); talché sí fatte allegorie debbon essere l'etimologie de' parlari poetici, che ne dassero le loro origini tutte univoche, come quelle de' parlari volgari sono più spesso analoghe. E ce ne giunse pure la deffinitione d'essa voce "*etimologia*", che suona lo stesso che "*veriloquium*", siccome essa favola ci fu diffinita "*vera narratio*". ("*Thus the mythologies, as their name indicates, must have been the proper languages of the fables; the fables being imaginative class concepts, as we have shown, the mythologies must have been the allegories corresponding to them. Allegory is defined as diversiloquium insofar as, by identity, not of proportion but (to speak scholastically) of predicability, allegories signify the diverse species or the diverse individuals comprised under these genera. So that they must have a univocal sig-*

---

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, Volume II, *Augustine to Scotus* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 356.



nification connoting a quality common to all their species and individuals (as Achilles connotes the idea of valor common to all strong men, or Ulysses an idea of prudence common to all wise men); such that these allegories must be the etymologies of the poetic languages, which would make their origins all univocal, whereas those of the vulgar languages are more often analogical. We also have the definition of the word "etymology" itself as meaning veriloquium, just as fable was defined as vera narratio" [403]).

This is a fundamental statement, not only because in it Vico makes explicit that his concept of allegorical univocity is grounded in metaphysics, but for a variety of other reasons as well. The passage, in fact, invites commentary on several points. In the first place, Vico draws an important distinction between myth and mythology. When it is separated into its two root words, the term "mythology" means no more than the speech of myth, "i propi parlari delle favole." Mythology is therefore understood neither as a totality of related myths nor as the discipline that studies them, which are the two common meanings of the term, but, etymologically ("tanto suona tal voce"), as that which a myth utters forth to the community in virtue of which it exists and which looks to it for sense and guidance. This is the reason why Vico speaks here of "mitologie", in the plural, for each myth speaks its own message. And in being so spoken, that message acquires material existence and thereby becomes available for philological examination. When this takes place, the mythological utterance of a myth may be properly called its allegory, since the latter refers only to the real signification of the myth as identified by the historical hermeneutics of philology.

In the second place the passage makes the point, more forcefully than elsewhere in the *Scienza nuova*, that the signification of historical allegory is always a relational structure, in the sense that it is the epistemic bridge that links genus to species. With respect to number, allegory is a mode of going from the singular to the plural, while with respect to essence, we have the added feature that the members of the signified plurality are all identical, their identity being a consequence of their univocal determination by means of a "ragion comune", which is Vico's term for what classical Thomism would call the ratio of each signified species or the thing that determines them all because it is their semantic and ontological content.<sup>11</sup> This recognition of its relational form makes Vico's concept of historical allegory much more familiar to modern readers of the *Scienza nuova*. For students of literature, for

---

<sup>11</sup>On this point see, I.M. Bochenski, "On Analogy," in *Inquiries into Medieval Philosophy* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1971), p. 101.

example, are acquainted with this kind of structure from such characters as Everyman in medieval drama and from such texts as the first two verses of Dante's *Commedia*, where, by means of the pronouns "nostra" and "mi" ("Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura") the interpretive focus is made to glide back and forth along the line that links genus to species and is finally made to rest on the essential identity of all the species imaginable under that genus. Because it uses an imaginative genus to represent a plurality of species, historical allegory is furthermore recognizable as the prototype of what, perhaps since Cicero, has come to be regarded as the most common understanding of allegory, which is that allegory is an extended metaphor.<sup>12</sup> For surely the structure in which a genus represents a plurality of species may be regarded as an extension of the structure in which the same genus stands for a single species, that is to say an extension of a certain type of metaphor, since a configuration for the transference of genus to species is, as Vico read in Aristotle, one of the four possible structures of metaphor, the first, in fact, to be analyzed in the *Poetics*.<sup>13</sup>

In the third place the above passage establishes the epistemic structure of historical allegory as the etymological principle of all poetic phrases and words. There are four steps in Vico's argument. First, when the Greek word for "etymology" is resolved into "etymon" and "logos", Vico observes that etymology becomes "veriloquium" or true speech. Second, on the orthographic model of this attested Latin word, and allusively in opposition to Isidore's "alieniloquium", Vico suggests the constructed term "diversiloquium" as the etymology of allegory. Third, on the basis of what he has already said regarding the univocal nature of primeval communication, Vico claims that poetic languages are grounded in univocity, whereas vernacular languages, which are produced by means of conventional signs (173), are grounded in analogy. And fourth, Vico interprets "mythos" as "vera narratio" and suggests that this interpretation is authenticated by a respectable philological tradition. From these considerations Vico concludes, on philosophical and on philological grounds, that an etymological account of the origin of poetic languages is of necessity mythical and hence allegorical.

When it is viewed in the context of the considerations on allegory so far analyzed, Vico's argument is both clear and forceful. However it calls for further commentary, since the validity of his philological foundation has been questioned by his most authoritative modern editor, and since Vico himself was for some time uncertain regarding the best

---

<sup>12</sup>*De Oratore*, 3, 166.

<sup>13</sup>*Poetics* 1457<sup>b</sup>10.

way to present his reasoning. With respect to philological accuracy, Fausto Nicolini regards Vico's statement that he has valid predecessors in the interpretation of myth as "vera narratio" an "affermaazione priva di fondamento."<sup>14</sup> While it is true that no Greek usage of *mythos* in this acceptation is attested,<sup>15</sup> Vico's statement is fully justified if we keep in mind that he understood myth as history. For the phrase *vera narratio* is indeed found in Renaissance historiographical theory as a definition of history. Vico could have encountered it in Sebastian Fox-Morzillo's *De Historia Instituenda* (1557) or, more likely, in Jean Bodin's *Methodus ad Facilem Historiarum Cognitione* (1566), the first chapter of which opens with the following words: "Historiae, id est verae narrationis, tria sunt genera."<sup>16</sup> Vico borrowed the expression because he, quite legitimately, saw it as covering also his notion of myth.

Regarding Vico's own concerns, we note that the 1730, the 1734, and the 1744 redactions of the passage in question contain variants which indicate that he struggled for considerable time with the structure and content of his argument, fearing without doubt that it might be regarded as philologically extravagant and logically less than clear. With respect to philology, the only troubling moment was his statement that vernacular languages, that is to say languages developed on the principle of conventional signification, are analogical while primitive languages univocal. In the 1730 edition he attempted to give this part of his argument philological roots by presenting his position as a rejection of the one that he thought Caesar had defended against Cato the Censor in his lost work *De analogia*. In this attempt to give philological grounding to a theoretical proposition, Vico was following his usual method, doing here no more than he had done, say, when he extrapolated his concept of the three ages from Herodotus (52). But he must have realised that his conjecture on the content of Caesar's work was purely speculative and that his assumption that Caesar had written that work against Cato was unfounded, being based on a misreading of Svetonius, as Nicolini has shown,<sup>17</sup> and so in the 1744 edition he dropped the passage altogether.

As for the clarity of his logic, in the fourth series of his *Correzioni*,

<sup>14</sup>In his edition of Vico's *Opere* (Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi, 1953), p. 517, n.2.

<sup>15</sup>A fact which, as Nicolini observes in his *Commento storico alla seconda Scienza nuova* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1978), I, p. 147, was pointed as early as 1749 by Damiano Romano.

<sup>16</sup>p. 11 of the 1577 edition (Parisii: Apud Martinum Iuvenem). For Fox-Morzillo's use of the definition and for his relationship with Bodin, see John L. Brown, *The Methodus ad Facilem Historiarum Cognitionem of Jean Bodin: A Critical Study* (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1939), pp. 61-62.

<sup>17</sup>Nicolini, *Commento storico*, II, p. 163.

*miglioramenti, ed aggiunte*, which represent the 1734 redaction of the *Scienza nuova*, Vico attempted to improve it by adding inferential details: "Talché essendo l'etimologie quelle che ne danno l'origini delle voci, e le favole furono le prime voci che usò la gentilità, le mitologie poetiche sono appunto quelle che qui noi trattiamo, che ne danno le vere origini delle favole" (1219). But in preparing the 1744 edition Vico decided in favour of brevity and excised the sentence. The conclusion that etymology is reducible to mythological allegory does not in effect need these details, because it is clear that, as he goes back to the very beginnings of linguistic history, the etymologist cannot but meet at the root of every name man's first epistemic form, which Vico has already established as univocal allegory.

Vico's discussion of etymology in the above quoted paragraph contains yet another point of interest, mentioned by him in an almost incidental way, since it is not a central part of the immediate argument. This is the idea that poetic language can survive and is possible in the non-poetic ages of history, the allegories of which "sono piú spesso analoghe." If univocal allegory is the root of poetic language as such, it must be also the root of the poetic language that can still be found in the non-poetic ages of history, that is to say, the language of poetical texts. As a consequence, allegory becomes an integral part of poetic theory. "Tutte queste degnità," he says with reference to the axioms that define the nature of poetic characters,

compiono tutta la ragion poetica nelle sue parti, che sono: la favola, il costume e suo decoro, la sentenza, la locuzione e la di lei evidenza, l'allegoria, il canto e per ultimo il verso. ("cover the divisions of poetic theory: namely, fable; custom and its appropriateness; sentence; locution and its expressiveness; allegory; song; and finally verse" [SN 235]).

Besides the addition of allegory to the list of conceptual categories that concern poetics, other differences distinguish Vico's understanding of the theory of poetry from Aristotle's. Whereas the categories of plot ("favola"), thought ("sentenza"), and verse ("verso") correspond exactly to the original ones used by Aristotle, diction, which is here understood from the perspective of a stylistic preference for perspicuity ("locuzione e la di lei evidenza") corresponds in part to the original, whereas "costume e suo decoro" only very imperfectly recall the Aristotelian "ethos." These differences are in themselves significant deviations from Aristotelian premises, but it is undoubtedly the presence of allegory that most radically distinguishes the Vichian from the Aristotelian notion of poetics. Here Vico vindicates the status of allegory as a concern for poetic theory by means of a radically polemical gesture against the anti-allegorical critical tradition, which ultimately derived from Aristotle's Poetics. Aristotle, it will be recalled, does not

recognize that it is possible for an allegorical action to be developed alongside the one imitated by the plot, since this would dissolve away the poem's essential unity. Therefore in the *Poetics* he does not grant "hyponoia", which is the classical term for what came to be called allegory, any status whatsoever. Allegory is not for him an appropriate analytical category through which to view the content of poetry. Consequently a critical stance that purports to bring allegory into the domain of poetics is automatically of an anti-Aristotelian character. In proposing to do just that, Vico assumes a revisionist role and in the above quoted passage redefines the traditional domain of poetics.

In the early eighteenth century, when the philosophical conception of the discipline of poetics was still to a very considerable extent dominated, with varying degrees of orthodoxy, by Aristotelianism, Vico's revisionist stance in the definition of its legitimate concerns is noteworthy, but its significance must not be exaggerated, for contemporary practical criticism most certainly did not shun the question of allegory. What may instead be considerably more surprising to a reader who approaches Vico from the perspective of the problem situation of early eighteenth-century poetic theory is the conspicuous absence in his text of any allusion to contemporary research on allegory, whether or not this research carried with it the philosophical need for a new definition of the discipline of poetics. For since the turn of the seventeenth century, the question of allegory had become culturally central, so much so that it is only reasonable to assume that Vico was familiar with, and had an opinion on, the chief theories that had been advanced.

A quick glance at some highlights of Dante criticism can give us a sufficiently accurate idea of contemporary interest in allegory. The first edition of Dante's letter to Cangrande della Scala is published in 1700 issue of *Galleria di Minerva* by Apostolo Zeno, while in 1708 Gianvincenzo Gravina in the *Ragion poetica* first proposed analysing the complex allegory of the *Commedia* in terms of a signifier-signified dichotomy, and in 1723, Anton Maria Biscioni, in his *Prose di Dante Alighieri e di Messer Gio. Boccacci*, greatly improved the text of the, previously unintelligible, passage of the *Convivio* (II, 1, 3) in which Dante distinguishes the literal from the allegorical sense of poetry, and attempted the first systematic allegorization of Beatrice.<sup>18</sup> The impression that one gets from the *Scienza nuova*, however, is that Vico's reappraisal of allegory was conceived in a totally independent manner, despite his well known struggle to reconcile his admiration for Dante's "barbaric" poetry with his aversion to its philosophical content, and despite the fact that in 1728 or 1729, that is to say just before issuing his

---

<sup>18</sup>On these issues see Domenico Pietropaolo, *Dante Studies in the Age of Vico* (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1988), pp. 56-58, 216-218, 354-371.

second edition of the *Scienza nuova*, he was so involved in Dante criticism as to accept to collaborate on a project to publish a new annotated edition of the *Divina Commedia*.<sup>19</sup>

Yet in the *Scienza nuova* Vico does not discuss the implications of his theory of allegory for practical literary criticism, though his inclusion of allegory in the domain of "ragion poetica" clearly indicates that he did not wish his ideas to be confined to the examination of ancient myths, that is to say to the realm of the poetic as a historical category. One is almost tempted to interpret Vico's silence concerning the external context in which his readers would place his notion of allegory as another instance of his peculiar need to create for himself a rhetorical persona heroically distant from his contemporaries. But such an interpretation would be unjustified, because Vico clearly developed his notion of allegory as a logical implication of his system of thought, in response to the internal exigencies of his philosophy of man in history, and not also as an explicit response to what contemporary literary critics had to say on the matter. His silence concerning other theories can certainly be regarded as a gesture of rejection, as a statement that conventional approaches to allegory are irrelevant to his science of humanity, but it cannot be regarded as a restriction of his theory to the historically poetic.

It is true, however, that Vico's interpretation of historical allegory as the principle of poetic characters, and consequently also as the semantic basis of myth and etymology, in terms of a univocal relationship between species and genus makes use of a vocabulary that is as marginal to the tradition of poetic criticism and theory as it is central to that of logic. To be sure, words such as "genus" and "species" have a high frequency of occurrence in metaphysical discourse, and we have already seen how Vico's use of them explicitly recalls the metaphysical assumptions behind his idea of imaginative genre. But in so far as it can be regarded, apart from the nature of the things that it names, as a vocabulary for the signification of thinking about reality, the language of metaphysics becomes the language of logic, "perché quella ch'è metafisica in quanto contempla le cose per tutti i generi dell'essere, la stessa è logica in quanto considera le cose per tutti i generi di significarle" (400).

---

<sup>19</sup>Though it was first published posthumously only in 1818, the article known as "Giudizio sopra Dante" (Fubini) or "Discovertà del vero Dante" (Nicolini) was originally meant to preface Pompeo Venturi's edition of Dante's *Commedia*, which was later published, without Vico's preface, by Capurri in Lucca in 1732. On the probable date of Vico's article see Benedetto Croce, "Il giudizio su Dante del Vico e il commento del Venturi," now in *Conversazioni critiche*, serie terza (Bari: Laterza, 1932), p. 318. On Vico's Dante criticism see Pietropaolo, pp. 63-92 and 99-105.

This grounding of allegory in logic would seem to undermine somewhat its status as a legitimate object of poetic theory. But that is not the case, because in choosing to develop his theory of allegory from within the realm of logic rather than rhetoric or poetics, in which he would probably have had to conduct his analysis in terms of symbols and metaphors and to relate it to the other issues surrounding the traditional "res et verba" dichotomy, Vico actually adheres to an old philosophical practice which regarded rhetoric, poetics, and logic as disciplines that had much in common in so far as they were the tools of knowledge or the ancillary "instrumental sciences" of philosophy.<sup>20</sup> In the sixth century, Simplicius had first included the Poetics and the Rhetoric among the philosopher's logical works, that is to say together with the *Peri Hermeneias* and the other treatises of his *Organon*, a grouping which eventually came to function as the chief hermeneutical paradigm for the examination of each of the works involved. Through the Arabic transmission of Aristotle, that paradigm reached the Italian Renaissance, significantly conditioning, not only the way in which these works were to be interpreted by Aristotelian scholars, but also the manner in which the problems contemplated in them were to be analyzed even outside of Aristotelian studies.<sup>21</sup>

One consequence of this classification was the free interpenetration of the different disciplines and hence the natural availability of the conceptual framework of one of them for the illumination of issues that conceptually belonged to the others. For Vico this perspective was furthermore advantageous in that conventional poetics was not equipped to deal with the historically poetic, that is with the cognitive and signifying forms of primeval times, since it had been developed principally for the analysis of the rhetorically poetic, which uses those forms, including allegory, as artistic tools. And since, according to axiom CXVI of the *Scienza nuova*, theories must begin with the first historical appearance of the objects that they theorise, Vico could not explain the origin

---

<sup>20</sup>Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 13. In more recent times Pierre Gassendi had no difficulty classifying allegory as part of logic. As represented in the Bible, the domain of logic for Gassendi is constituted by "sanis sermonibus, historiis gravibus, concinnis carminibus, propositis eleganter aenigmatibus, allegoriis etc., quibus a pueritia usque imbuerentur," *De logicae origine et varietate liber unus in Syntagma philosophicum*, in *Opera omnia* (Lyons: 1658), p. 35, quoted by Francesco Bottin in "Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655)", in *Storia delle storie generali della filosofia*, ed. Giovanni Santinello (Brescia: Editrice La Scuola, 1981), p. 142.

<sup>21</sup>On the Arabic acceptance of the "logical" view of the *Poetics*, see Ismail M. Dahiyat, *Avicenna's Commentary on the Poetics of Aristotle* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), pp. 12-20.

of allegorical thinking without having recourse to the science concerned with the structure and signification of thought. Vico's treatment of allegory, therefore, does not compromise its status as an integral part of poetic theory; on the contrary, it explains how allegory was structured and how extensive was its scope prior to its transformation into the instrument of artistic discourse familiar to conventional poetics.

A second consequence of the interpenetration of the instrumental sciences was that the identification of primordial allegory could be seen as a fundamental task of the discipline concerned with understanding the act of naming, that is to say with general hermeneutics, a discipline which, in Vico's science of humanity, can have status only as historical hermeneutics. In the 1730 edition of the *Scienza nuova*, after asserting that allegory is the principle of etymology, Vico makes this very explicit. Referring to Aristotle's work on interpretation, which, as we have seen, had been generally grouped together with the Logic and the Poetics, he says:

E questa è la Periermeneia o interpretatione de' nomi: parte di questa logica poetica, dalla quale doveva quella di Aristotele incominciare. ("And this is the *peri hermeneias* or the interpretation of names: a part of this poetic logic, with which that of Aristotle ought to have begun" [1219, my translation]).

Aristotle's *Peri Hermeneias* is a treatise on the relationship between speech and thought. It is based on the principle that names signify by convention, and it is written from the perspective of logic, understanding speech, not as a grammatically coherent or incoherent combination of words, but as the true or false expression of thought. From a Vichian perspective one can argue that in writing this work Aristotle failed to observe that, everywhere and in all periods of history, mutes are able to make themselves understood by means of gestures or by exhibiting objects which their interlocutors can naturally associate with given ideas, a failure which induced him into concluding that there is no natural signification and that only conventional language is possible (16a20). Moreover, Aristotle does not see that an investigation of the process whereby thought is signified cannot begin and end with an analysis of the structures of expression in the rationalist present, which are mostly analogical and grounded in convention, for it presupposes the effort to see through those structures all the way back to the primordial utterances from which they ultimately derive. As axiom CVI teaches, a theory of how thought is signified by speech must begin with an explanation of how the very first human thought was so signified.

The basic methodological principle of general hermeneutics, which is that the interpretive method must lead back to the point where the



process of formation of the object being examined actually began, was fundamental to Vico's philosophy, as Betti has shown.<sup>22</sup> Therefore the interpretation of names can only be a historical hermeneutics grounded in etymology. The conventional relationship between names and thoughts in the present is the final result of a historical process that began in the natural univocity of historical allegory. A Vichian treatise on the interpretation of names, that is to say a Vichian *Peri Hermeneias*, would have to begin its explanation of the essence of nomenclatural practice with a description of man's first naming act at the dawn of civilization.

As Vico began to look at historical evidence of primitive mental processes, he realised that the critical apparatus available to him for the general investigation of modes of thinking, namely the conceptual categories of philosophy and the inferential algorithms of rational logic, was not universally applicable, as it was thought to be, but was limited to the analysis of discursive thought alone. To apply it to non-discursive thought processes, such as those which obtained prior to the development of the rational faculty, as in the case of primitive peoples and of all children, and those followed by creative artists, whose minds leap from one image to the other without the aid of rules of inference, would be to assimilate them to logic and to distort them beyond recognition. This apparatus needed to be enriched with a hermeneutical category capable of grasping the way in which species is related to genus, by and in a mind that can have no recourse to abstraction, and hence of understanding cognitive dynamics that are not grounded in rules of inference. That interpretive paradigm is for Vico univocal allegory.

The individual allegories subsumed in the original names were to comprise the allegorical index that Vico at one point thought of appending to the text of the *Scienza nuova*. Had he compiled it, the list would have been a collection of ideas radically different from the ones that contemporary interpreters of ancient mythology and literature generally read into the traditional stories of gods and heroes. Through the agency of univocal allegory, the Vichian interpreter of civil history could return to the age when men first felt the need to organize their thoughts into explanatory narratives. Like contemporary philosophical or analogical interpreters of ancient culture, the Vichian philologist begins with modern perceptions of mythology, but, unlike them, he does not argue in favour of this or that equally rationalist interpretation of individual stories. Conscious as he is that mind is not only the agent

---

<sup>22</sup> For Betti that principle is in fact a consequence of the *verum-factum* premise applied to history. See Emilio Betti, "I Principi di scienza nuova di G.B. Vico e la teoria della interpretazione storica," in *Diritto, Metodo, Ermeneutica*, a cura di Giuliano Crifò (Milano: Giuffrè, 1991), p. 462.

of history but also its product, he moves backwards along the process of man's social development until he meets a point beyond which there is only darkness. He then looks forward to the present, explaining each stage of that development in terms of the correlative modifications that occur in the human mind as it acquires and masters the ability to reason. Univocal allegory is the key to the way men thought out the scheme of things at the beginning of historical time, when their very lack of that ability first caused them to terrify themselves out of bestial confusion and to begin their long climb to rational humanity.

*University of Toronto*