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The Role of Poetic Language in *The New Science* of Giambattista Vico

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Abstract

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In the seventeenth century the Italian rhetorician Giambattista Vico imagined the history of human civilization in his major work *The New Science*. He conceived the progression of humanity from barbarism along the way towards the construction of a self-conscious mind, the highest and final achievement of human development. Nonetheless, with the realization of self-consciousness, a new form of barbarism looms in the destiny of human beings: the barbarism of reflection.

The aim of this study is to explore which role poetic language has in *The New Science*. The language is defined as “poetic” by Vico, because the world is a human creation devised by means of language. Body, metaphor and social interaction are the key elements of the gnoseological operation of devising the world as well as the main objects of this study.

The theories applied in the study are taken from Vico’s own rhetorical method which is interpreted in close relationship with Deleuze’s philosophical reflections about repetition and difference.

In the thesis it is argued that the body is conceived by Vico as the linguistic matrix out of which corporal needs and emotional forces are abstracted in order to shape the world. Metaphor is described as the cognitive instrument used in order to replicate the body. The interaction regards the linguistic process which is understood as collective because gestures, shouts, acts and words assume a gnoseological significance only by interaction. In my interpretation the social construction of human civilizations ends with the construction of the human mind, described by Vico as an operation of self-reflection.

A close reading of selected parts is the method used in order to grasp the obscure and fascinating prose of *The New Science*, a classical and still not fully understood work, which inspired generations of poets and critics.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background: Vico's work in context

Giambattista Vico's (1668–1744) vision of history, philosophy and knowledge is based on theories he developed from the rhetorical tradition and from the poetic language of classical writers.

Vico's major work *The New Science* is today regarded as a cornerstone of the western philosophical tradition, despite the baroque and demanding style, the outstanding but uncommon ideas about language, poetics and history which, together with the historical decline of the rhetorical tradition, have for a long time been almost insurmountable obstacles to *The New Science* spreading outside Italy. It is not just a coincidence that Vico's work has not been translated into English before 1948, more than two hundred years after the third edition was published in 1744.¹

It is only at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce gave new impulse to the study of Vico's philosophy, that Vico's ideas started to be seen also outside of Italy capturing the attention of writers such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, philologists such as Erich Auerbach who translated *The New Science* into German and the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer who mentioned Vico in his major work *Truth and Method*.

The explanation for the growing attention for Vico's works lies in the fact that his rethinking of rhetoric, perceived not only as the art of building an elegant discourse but, above all, as the means that humankind employs in order to shape and understand its own world, can contribute, even in the contemporary debate about history and literature, with new views and perspectives.

Before writing the first edition of *The New Science*, which Vico published in 1725 at the age of 57, he developed and published many of his theories and ideas in previous works. A short description of his main ideas is necessary in order to get a grasp of his thinking in *The New Science*.

In 1710 he published *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*.² The work should have

¹ The original title is *Principj di Scienza nuova di Giambattista Vico. D'intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni*. In the English translation *Principles of the New Science of Giambattista Vico. About the common nature of the Nations*.

² The original title is *De antiquissima italorum sapientia ex linguae latinae originibus eruenda*.

included three books: the first on metaphysics, the second on physics, the third on ethics. He wrote only the first one, the *Liber metaphysicus*, where his reflections about the reality and the made, successively known as the *verum-factum* principle, are crucial in order to understand Vico's philosophy.³ In the first section of chapter 1 "Concerning the origin and truth of the sciences" Vico explains his ideas about metaphysical points:

So, at first, man proceeds by these various means, follows traces of the nature of things and eventually upon reflection realizes that he cannot arrive at the nature of things on this basis because he does not have within himself the elements in accordance with which composite things exist; in addition, he realizes that this is the result of the limited scope of his mind, for all things are outside that mind; subsequently, man turns this vice of his mind to good use and by abstraction, as they say, feigns for himself two things, a point which can be designated and a unit which can be multiplied. And yet both of these are fictions, for this point, once you designate it, is not a point, and this unit, once you multiply it, is no longer a unit. Over and beyond this, man assumes for himself the right to advance from these fictions all the way to the infinite such that he may draw out lines endlessly and multiply innumerable times. So, on this basis, he finds within himself a sort of world of forms and numbers, a universe circumscribed by himself, and by extending or cutting or composing lines, by adding, subtracting or computing numbers, he effects infinite works because he knows within himself infinite truths.⁴

According to Vico, the world is created by God and only God can fully understand it. Human beings have the capacity to make (Vico uses the verb "feign") truths in their minds "by abstraction". These truths are metaphysical points which have in themselves the powers of extension and of movement. Language is perceived as an extension of these metaphysical points and it is the only reality that men have created, as well as the only reality that can be the object of a scientific enquiry. Language is moreover the only method available in order to carry out the scientific enquiry and this explains the reason why a scientific enquiry can never reach the truth but only the verisimilar.

The method of analysis Vico used in *The New Science* to explore the truth is drawn from rhetoric. He was appointed as professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples and many of

³ The first section of chapter 1 opens with the statement that *verum* (reality) and *factum* (the made) *convertitur* (are interchangeable). Giambattista Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of Italians*, text, translation and interpretative essay by Jason, Taylor, p. 78.

⁴ Giambattista Vico's *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians: Text, translation and interpretive essay* by Jason Taylor, p. 78.

his ideas come from the subject he taught.

In the opening speech of the academical year in 1708 which was published the year after with the title *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (hereafter only *De Ratione*), he underlines the importance of *ars topica* as the method to find the *medium term*, which is the way one word or concept puts two different words or concepts in a logic relationship.⁵ Through the doctrine of the *medium term*, Vico discovers the *sensus communis* which is the expression of the “verisimile” (verisimilar).⁶ In *De Ratione* he understands *ars topica* as the art of finding the verisimilar and *ars critica* as the art of criticism. The latter implies a reflection about the common rules through which the verisimilar is generated. Vico argues that, if finding the verisimilar is the essence of the art of rhetoric, the *ars critica*, a critical reflection over the rhetorical process, is necessary in order to make the verisimilar as much as possible a true knowledge.⁷

He also stresses the key importance of the audience in order to find the verisimilar. The whole process of finding new arguments and new ideas (*ars topica*) is described by Vico as a dynamic relation between the orator and the public.⁸

1.2 Theory – rhetoric and rhetorical concepts

In order to interpret Vico’s work I find it logical and necessary to apply his rhetorical method.⁹

In my study the reconstruction of Vico’s method is based on his ideas about the rhetorical doctrine of the *medium term* which is connected to the metaphorical understanding of language and to *ars topica*, the art of finding arguments. Vico’s ideas about *ars critica*, his explanations about the relationship between the speaker and the public as well as his thoughts about the confrontation of different standpoints in the forensic practice are also relevant for this thesis.

⁵ According to Treccani.it, the Italian word “mediare” means to put in a logic relationship one word with another, in Italian “mettere in relazione logica un termine con un altro”. The medium term has therefore the capacity to mediate (mediare).

⁶ Vico, *De ratione*, p. 37.

⁷ Vico, *De ratione*, p. 39.

⁸ Vico, *De ratione*, p. 73.

⁹ The main sources of Vico’s rhetorical doctrine are Aristotle with *Rhetorica*, Cicero with almost all the works, Horace with *Ars Poetica* (Vico wrote a *Commentary to Ars Poetica*), Quintilianus with *Institutio Oratoria* (arguably the most quoted work in the *Art of Rhetoric*) and *Rhetorica ad Herennium*.

The key characteristic of the doctrine of the *medium term* is the “enthymematic power” which he describes in his work *The Art of Rhetoric*.¹⁰

The power of ingenuity [...] consists in the reciprocal joining of diverse things. Indeed, in acute saying, these three features are found – the things (*res*), the word (*verba*), and the joining or tying (*ligamen*) of things and words. The tie, moreover, consists of two kinds – the one of the sensible, the other of the intelligible. The former affects the joining of things, the latter the joining of ideas. Once again, the intelligible is subdivided in two types – the one is a simple bond by which, without glue of another idea, two ideas are easily joined. [...] The other type is a tie which joins two ideas by the mediation of a third, that is, by some reason either expressed or implied, which the third activity of our minds and it is referred to by dialecticians as the syllogism and by the rhetoricians as the enthymeme.¹¹

Vico speaks about syllogism also in *De Ratione* where he underlines that *ars topica* cannot be a syllogism because syllogism “adds nothing new” since it is contained in the premises.¹²

In *The Art of Rhetoric* he explains the reason why syllogism cannot be *ars topica*.

Enthymematic power [...] can also be concealed in one word as, for example, when Terence’s Parmenon referred to Thaïs as the calamity of the master’s estate. Here the enthymeme is hidden in the one word. [...] If you would want to express explicitly the same with dialecticians, it would be necessary that you reason thus – “Calamity destroys all that the farmer needs to harvest. That which is necessary for us to take, Thaïs intercepts. Thaïs, therefore, is the calamity of our estate”–¹³

The example is taken from Terence’s *Eunuch* in the passage where Parmeno comments Phaedra's love for Thaïs who is described as a calamity.

In the example, Vico explains that syllogism is possible only when both of the premises are explicit. The rhetorical process needs to be explained in detail because it shows how the orator finds the medium term. In the example quoted by Vico the syllogism would be as follows:

- 1) Calamity takes everything from the master’s estate
- 2) Thaïs takes everything from the master’s estate (This premise is not explicit in the

¹⁰ In the original version it is written in Latin (*Institutiones Oratoriae* 1711 - 1714) and is a compendium of Vico’s lessons at the University of Naples.

¹¹ Vico, *The Art of Rhetoric*, p. 126.

¹² Vico, *De Ratione*, p. 73.

¹³ Vico, *The Art of Rhetoric*, p. 126.

enthymeme)

3) Thaïs is a calamity for the master's estate

In the enthymeme the sentence 2) "Thaïs takes everything from the master's estate" is not given but is the product of the intuition of the orator. This intuition has of course to be intelligible by the audience.

This rhetorical process of finding the *medium term* is defined by Vico as a metaphoric process.¹⁴ The medium term, which is also called metaphor by Vico, is the word "calamity" and it functions as a vehicle which "transports" an abstracted idea of the sentence "takes everything from the master's estate" over to Thaïs. In this way Thaïs's action is "metaphoric" associated with the effects of a calamity which destroys physically "the master's estate".

This operation of ingenuity (Vico uses the word *ingenium*) can also be described as a "repetition". In the mentioned case, repetition concerns the word "calamity" which is defined as an "act of taking from the master's estate". The first mental operation is to take the word "calamity" out from the original context and ascribe an abstract meaning to it, the second mental operation applies this abstract meaning to a new concrete situation (the here and now).

In the study *Difference and Repetition* Gilles Deleuze explains that a repetition implies a transition from a "contracted" understanding of reality to the here and now (Deleuze uses the corresponding Latin expression *hic et nunc*). Deleuze clarifies that language is the means we use in order to achieve this contraction.¹⁵

Repetition can be described as the mental operation which enables the speaker and the listener to apply to a particular situation a linguistic abstract expression. Deleuze's reflection is interesting in order to comprehend Vico's doctrine of the *medium term* because it appears clear to me that the doctrine of the *medium term* (and the metaphorical thinking) can also be described as a process of "repetition".

In the mentioned example we have the sentence "Thaïs is a calamity" where the understanding of the word "calamity" is a "repetition" of the abstracted idea of "calamity". This concept once "repeated" assumes a specific meaning which depends on the concrete circumstances (Deleuze's *hic et nunc*). The operation of repeating the contracted concept of calamity can of course lead to a completely different meaning depending on the particular

¹⁴ Vico, *The Art of Rhetoric*, p. 126.

¹⁵ Deleuze explains this process on p. 13 (the passage to the *hic et nunc*) and on p. 74 (about the language as contraction).

circumstances. The difference can be so big that the same word can have opposite meanings in concrete situations.¹⁶

In Vico's rhetoric this act of repetition is described as "*ingenium*" (ingenuity) and it is crucial to the understanding of his work. *Ingenium* is thus a fictive or imaginative "power" because it associates two "ideas" which do not have so much in common. In the example we have on the one hand a disaster generated by natural meteorological phenomena to concrete objects (the master's estate can be a house or maybe a field used for agriculture), on the other hand we have a mental disorder generated by the feelings for one person.

Moreover, regarding the way repetition works, the sentence "someone is a calamity" has to be comprehensible by a larger audience in order to be the expression of the verisimilar, of the "collective knowledge" which Vico describes as "*sensus communis*".

The enthymematic power can consequently be described as a "repetition" of a collective knowledge which is shared by the audience. In *The Art of Rhetoric* Vico claims that "the orator deals with the will of listeners and the will, when conquered, surrenders only to the one God who is the incliner of wills".¹⁷ Here Vico explains that the orator has not the faculty to persuade but it is God that has it. Vico clarifies that it is "in the argument" that "we find abundance of the power of eloquence".¹⁸ The orator holds the audience with truth and "turns [it] about by feelings".¹⁹

Here Vico means that the role of the orator is to find the truth by searching arguments (*ars topica*) and the arguments the orator finds are valuable only if they can move the audience's "feelings". The audience is truly moved and convinced only in the case the speech brings "about in the listener a spirit of conformity with the oration by which the listener will feel about the cause as does the orator".²⁰ The conformity between the orator's speech and the audience's feeling is the key element in order to understand Vico's *sensus communis* because it makes clear that the orator must share a common ground with the listeners.

This common ground is shared not only on the basis of the "rational" force of the arguments

¹⁶ In the example of the calamity, I can say that "someone is a calamity" and with this I could mean that "someone has the strength of a natural phenomenon". The negative connotation of the word, which the word calamity usually has, in this example disappears and assumes a positive meaning.

¹⁷ Vico, *The Art of Rhetoric*, p. 5.

¹⁸ Vico, *The Art of Rhetoric*, p. 7.

¹⁹ Vico, *The Art of Rhetoric*, p. 7.

²⁰ Vico, *The Art of Rhetoric*, p. 5.

but, above all, on the capacity of the speech to raise emotions in the audience. The verisimilar in Vico is not rational but emotional knowledge.

The way the speech reaches conformity can also be dialectical if the rhetoric of legal procedures applies. In Chapter Twenty-Two of *The Art of Rhetoric* Vico treats the “Judicial Cause” in the criminal procedure and shows that a common ground can be formed by the confrontation of different points of views. The balance which the parts find in the forensic confrontation can also be described as “contracted” because it hides all the arguments which the parts have employed in order to reach that point of *equilibrium*. Moreover, the *equilibrium* the parts reach is, in theory, always open to new arguments and, via new arguments, it can change all the time. This process in a way has “the right to advance from these fictions all the way to the infinite”.²¹

The dialectic confrontation of the forensic practice if applied to the *sensus communis* therefore shows that the common ground is not a fixed ground, but it is always a dynamic mediation between many points of view.

1.3 Previous research

The purpose of this section is not to give a full account of the status of research about Vico but is just to shortly present some of the most relevant contributions which I am going to use in this thesis. These works are important because they give valuable philological, philosophical and historical information about *The New Science*.

My presentation roughly follows a chronological order. In the paper “Vico and aesthetic historicism” published in the book *Scenes From the Drama of European Literature* (1959), Eric Auerbach points out that three main aspects of Vico’s ideas are interesting for contemporary research: the magic formalism of the men at their earliest stage, the cognitive aspects which characterizes Vico’s theory, human nature as a function of human history.

In 1981 Donald P. Verene published the book *Vico's Science of Imagination* which is regarded as a standard work on Vico. Verene underlines the importance of the metaphysical points as the foundation of the verum-factum principle and discovers “the imaginative characters” as a fundamental idea in Vico's *New Science*. In 2015 Verene followed up with the book *Vico's New Science. A Philosophical Commentary* that is an indispensable reading in

²¹ Giambattista Vico’s *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, p. 78.

order to grasp the most profound insights of Vico's major work.

Vico tra antichi e moderni (2004) by Andrea Battistini is an indispensable source of knowledge with regard to the use of literary tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, antonomasia, the connection of these tropes with euhemerism) in *The New Science*. Battistini's reflections about the role of Virgil in *The New Science* have helped me to understand the role of poets in *The New Science*. Moreover Battistini's Italian edition of Vico's *The New Science* has been a valid source for the English edition (2020) I am using in this investigation.

Paolo Cristofolini's book *La Scoperta del vero Omero seguita dal Giudizio sopra Dante* (2006) compares on the one hand Vico's reflections about the role of Homer, which he discusses in Book 3 of *The New Science*, and, on the other hand, Vico's thoughts about Dante, that he expressed in a letter written in 1725.

David L. Marshall's *Vico and the Transformation of Rhetoric in Early Modern Europe* (2010) gives special attention to the legal and forensic background in Vico's philosophy. He underlines the influences of the Latin forensic tradition and argues that Vico developed a theory about social institutions based on his ideas about *sensus communis*.

Finally, Manuela Sanna's *Vico* published in 2018. In this work Sanna discusses all Vico's main ideas as a coherent philosophical system. Sanna's perspective is both historical and philosophical. Her reconstruction of Vico's concept of "wonder" in connection with Vico's geometrical method is essential in order to understand Vico's "post-structuralist" (the definition is mine) vision of knowledge characterized by an underlying instability. Her contributions to Vico's research go well beyond the mentioned work since Sanna has a key role in Italian Vico studies and is the editor and commentator of the critical editions of many of Vico's works and of the original edition in Italian which I am using in this study.

Apart from the above, I will refer to other works of the mentioned authors and of some other scholars.

1.4 Aim and research questions

The question which this study intends to answer regards the role of the poetic language in Vico's *The New Science*. The objective is to examine how Vico understands its function and its development in relation to the formation of human societies during the course of history.

The thesis aims to answer to the following questions:

In what way is the poetic language driven by the imaginative and irrational forces?

What is the role of the society in the formation of the poetic language?

What is the role of the rational forces?

What is the role of the poets in the formation of the poetic language?

1.5 Delimitations

The edition of *The New Science* examined is the one of 1744, but analysis will refer also to the editions of 1725 and 1730. Sections “Poetic Metaphysics” and “Poetic Logic” in Book 2 (paragraphs 374 - 501, page 132 – 193 of Taylor and Miner’s translation) are the starting points of my reflections. The editions used for this investigation is the English translation edited by Taylor and Miner and the original version in Italian edited by Manuela Sanna. The English translation will be contrasted with the original version in Italian in cases where I find the English translation less convincing.

1.6 Method

The method is a close reading of the relevant parts of *The New Science* (with focus on “On Poetic Metaphysics” and “On Poetic Logic”) which is considered as a coherent and united work. With close reading I mean that the interpretation will concentrate on the semantic structures of sentences which are organically interconnected in the text, that is consequently perceived as a coherent unit. Nevertheless, references to other Vico’s works may occur when it is beneficial for a deeper and more contextualized understanding of the text. For the same reason, I will highlight discrepancies in relation to ideas expressed in other works.

Historical and philosophical reconstructions of Vico’s background may also be taken into account, and in such cases I refer to previous studies concerning a specific interpretation of part of the text. The starting point of any discussion and any successive reasoning will be exclusively connected to Vico’s text.

My interpretation is oriented by the cultural horizon which shapes my critical thinking. Although the theory is undoubtedly borrowed from Vico’s previous works, it is a reconstruction *a posteriori*. How my cultural horizon, which influences my understanding, can affect my reasoning, how it can relate to other historical horizons and, in the case of this

study, how it can relate to Vico's historical horizon, is difficult to say. Nonetheless, historical texts are written documents that can be investigated, and this is the reason why I have chosen a close reading as the method of my examination.

2. Analysis

2.1 "On Poetic Metaphysics" and "On Poetic Logic": short summary and aim of analysis

The chapters "On Poetic Metaphysics" and "On Poetic Logic" in *The New Science* describe the origin of the poetic language and how language functions, respectively.²² In "Poetic Metaphysics" (§374-399) Vico explains that language originated from the "horrific beasts", the first men who lived on earth. The narration starts with these men because the key to understand metaphysics is in the modification of their minds. They had no capacity for reasoning, but they were provided with imagination, triggered by a strong sense of wonder. They sensed and admired nature around them, and so they created the myth of Jove. This myth was popular because it was shared by many, it was disturbing because it was prompted by the fear that these men felt towards the divine nature of the world, it was instructive because the first men learned good and evil from it.

In the Corollaries of the chapter Vico identifies seven principal aspects of *The New Science*: the divine providence is the main aspect outlined, the second aspect concerns the principle of authority which steers human actions, the third aspect acknowledges that *The New Science* is a history of ideas, the fourth concerns the philosophical art of criticism which informs the whole work, the fifth regards the fact that history follows an eternal path of courses and recurrences, the sixth aspect explains that *The New Science* shows the system of natural laws which regulates human nations, the seventh is that *The New Science* is a science of principles.

In the chapter "On Poetic Logic" (§400-501) Vico reasons about how language functions. The first language is mute, and it gives significance to the objects through signs and gestures. As the presence of the objects is perceived, the objects are identified with a linguistic expression. The linguistic operation is by Vico called allegory or *diversiloquium* which he

²² I use the word "poetic" in connection with language because it is used by Vico himself. Vico explains that poetry in its Greek etymological meaning means "creation". The poetic language is therefore the linguistic means that humankind uses in order to create/devise the world. Book 2 is named "Poetic Wisdom", because for Vico all the knowledge has a poetic character in *The New Science*. Language for Vico has a wide meaning. In "On Poetic Logic" is associated with *logos* and *mythos* which Vico intends as "speech", which he associates with signs, gestures, objects, words, but also as "deeds". See p. 146 (§401), Vico, *The New Science*, 2020.

understands as a combination of linguistic tropes. He mentions four tropes: metaphor that is the “greatest”, synecdoche and metonymy which share with metaphor the same mental mechanism, irony which is not a trope used by the first men since they did not have the capability of reflection (reflection is the main characteristic of irony, according to Vico).

In the Corollaries Vico reflects on the poetic characters of the civil nations, on the national languages, the writing systems, the signs and medallions, on money and natural law, on the poetic locution with songs and verses. In the last section “The logic of the learned” Vico explains that linguistic operations are possible thanks to the combination of *ars topica* and *ars critica*. In the case of the first men, only a “Topica Sensibile” (topics for the senses) applies.

In my analysis I am going to discuss the main aspects described in the chapters from three different perspectives. The first angle regards the emotional driving forces which steer the mental process of the first men. The second angle is the collective use of the language. The third angle concerns the rational forces.

The common thread which applies throughout the analysis is “repetition”. This common thread can also be deduced from the principle of authority defined by Vico as the second, after the divine providence, principal aspect of *The New Science*. With regard to the principle of authority, in Corollaries of “On Poetic Metaphysics”, Vico states that “the term ‘authority’” is used “in its primary significance as ‘property’” because “the term ‘author’ in the Roman civil code retains the sense of someone who has claim over some domain”.²³ Property is described as a “possession that comes from long occupation, which is the source of all the different domains in the world”.²⁴ For Vico occupation therefore entails the act of repeating the same action over and over, as in the case of taking possession of a place by staying in this place for a long time (*usucapio* in Roman law). In this way, authority can be perceived in its essence as a repetition of an action.

2.2. *The emotional forces*

In this section I analyze the concepts of wonder, fear, imagination as the key emotional forces which lead the first men to the representation of the external world.

The word “wonder” in Taylor and Milner’s translation corresponds to the Italian word

²³ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 139 (§386).

²⁴ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 141 (§389).

“meraviglia” and the Latin word “admiratio”. Sanna underlines that the word appeared in Vico’s notice to the reader which was published in the second edition (1730) of *The New Science*, but it disappeared in the third edition of 1744. Here Vico clarifies that *The New Science*

reasons with a rigorous geometrical method with which the true moves to an immediate true, and thus it makes its conclusions. In this way you get the habit to reason geometrically, so do not browse casually those books, if you want to read them, neither skip any parts, but keep reading the lesson from the beginning to the end. You shall expect, do not be full of wonder because of it, that, if the premises are true, and well arranged, almost all conclusions are wonderful. This happens often in Geometry, as in the case of the two lines, which come closer at the infinity, but never touch each other, because the outcome is perturbed by imagination, despite of the fact that the premises stayed attached to the pure abstract reason.²⁵

The geometrical method begins from the given premises, which are true per definition, and thereafter is followed by a *concatenatio causarum* (a chain of consequences).²⁶

In its standard and cartesian connotation the geometrical method is an elaboration of the syllogistic method with the addition of the empirical element, Sanna contends.²⁷ Imagination is the element which differentiates Vico’s geometrical method from the cartesian method because in the first, in opposition to the latter, the consequences are not logically deduced but imagined. In the quoted passage Vico plays with the word “wonder” which, in this context, has at least three nuances. Wonder is associated with the readers who discover that the “true” can be imagined. Wonder is associated with the conclusions since these conclusions are not logically deduced from the premises. Wonder is also associated with the Aristotelian concept of “wonder” from which the philosophy begins. In this connotation, “wonderful conclusions” can also be interpreted as the beginning of a new reasoning and Vico’s geometrical method

²⁵Sanna, *Vico*, p. 64. It is my translation of Sanna’s quotation of the sentence published in *La Scienza Nuova* 1730, p. 58, a cura di P. Cristofolini, con la collaborazione di M. Sanna, Guida, Napoli, 2004. The quotation in Sanna’s study states as follows: [questa scienza] ragiona con uno stretto *metodo geometrico*, con cui da *vero* passa ad immediato *vero*, e così vi fa le sue conclusioni. Laonde ti è bisogno di aver fatto l’*abito del ragionar geometricamente*; e perciò non aprire a sorte questi libri, per leggerli, nè per salti, ma continuarne la *lezione da capo a piedi*: e dei attendere, se le *premesse* sieno *vere*, e *ben’ordinate*, e non *meravigliarti*, se quasi tutte le *conclusioni* n’escano *meravigliose*: lo che sovente avviene in essa *Geometria*, come quella per esempio delle due linee, che tra loro in infino sempre s’accostano, e non mai si toccano; perché la *conseguenza* è turbata dalla *fantasia*; ma le *premesse* s’attenero alla pura *ragione astratta*.

²⁶ Sanna, *Vico*, p. 65.

²⁷ Sanna, *Vico*, p. 64.

can also be described as an “open” method. I presume this is the meaning that Vico gives to wonder in “On Poetic Metaphysics”.

At that time, since a few giants [...] were terrified and surrounded by a great effect whose cause they did not know, they raised their eyes and looked to the heavens. [...] And so, they started to give currency to the natural curiosity which [...] is the daughter of ignorance and the mother of science, which it begets whenever wonder makes our minds open.²⁸

The first men, terrified by natural phenomena such as thunders and lightnings, with their “minds open” raised “their eyes and looked to the heavens”.²⁹ They imagined that the heavens wanted to speak to them and with “wonder”, with open minds, they wanted to understand. A definition almost identical is given by Vico in Axiom 39 where he states that “wonder makes our minds open” so that “curiosity takes as its custom to ask straightway, whenever it observes an extraordinary effect in nature (like a comet, a parhelion or a midday star), what such a thing means or signifies”.³⁰

Wonder is therefore an experience related to curiosity and ignorance, on the one hand, and fear, on the other hand. It is fear that prompts a sense of “wonder”, and wonder can also be described as the first act of consciousness since these early men opened their minds when they became aware of their ignorance, and this awareness is the first act of knowledge and the basis for “curiosity”, the “mother” of science.

They emotionally felt the heavens in front of which they expressed their most violent passions, they shouted and grumbled. They shouted in order to overcome fear, but shouting while pointing at the sky is also the way they give expression to their passions and curiosity. This gesture is distinctively human because it is “clutching at a distance” and “is repetitive” because “the same act or gesture [...] is being used over and over”, says Verene.³¹

In this fashion, the earliest theological poets devised the first divine myth greater than any other devised after, the myth of Jove, king and father of men and gods, in the act of casting lightning bolts, a myth so popular, so disturbing, so instructive that even those who devised

²⁸ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 134-135 (§377).

²⁹ In Taylor and Miller’s translation “looked to” is employed in correspondence to the Italian word “avvertirono” which I would rather translate with “sensed”.

³⁰ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 86 (§189).

³¹ Verene, *Vico’s New Science. A Philosophical commentary*, p. 123-124.

it believed it; and in keeping with terrifying religions, as will be shown later, they feared, revered, and gave observance to this Jove.³²

In the same paragraph (§379) Vico mentions Axiom 34. Axioms are in *The New Science*'s structure, in accordance with Vico's geometrical method, the premises of the reasoning: they are true per definition.

A true property of human nature is that one noticed by Tacitus, where he says *mobiles ad superstitionem percussae semel mentes* [minds once struck by fear are prone to superstition]: so once men have been startled by some terrifying superstition, they invoke it in everything that they imagine, see, and even do.³³

The terrifying superstition is the first form of knowledge of the giants. In its etymological meaning (stand + over) the word superstition suggests that this form of knowledge is pervasive: they invoke it in everything they see and do, in their minds as well as in their actions. Superstition is pervasive because it is associated with fear. Fear is therefore associated with wonder in the first act of perceiving the world, but it is also associated with pervasiveness of human knowledge since knowledge is for Vico associated with salvation. The first men create (poetry means creation) the world in order to attain salvation, but they are not creators in the way God is. Through signs, images, gestures they start to discern themselves and the world around. Together with shouting and pointing at the heavens, grumbling is the other gesture used by the first men in order to imitate Jove's thunders because poetry is "nothing other than imitation of nature".³⁴

The earliest authors of humanity gave their attention to an art of topics for the senses, by which they united properties or qualities or relations which were, so to speak, concrete and which belonged to the individuals, or species, from which were formed the poetic genera to which they belonged.³⁵

In order to imitate nature the first men used an *ars topica* whose arguments are directly connected to the senses. It is the first stage of language and the means used are very basic, the level of abstraction is almost absent. The language at this stage has not a decorative but barely

³² Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 135-136 (§379).

³³ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 85-86 (§183).

³⁴ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 191 (§498).

³⁵ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 190 (§495).

a cognitive function. The topics for the senses are the cognitive operations that the first men carried out in order to give significance to nature. A similar expression appears when Vico speaks about allegory.

Allegories are described as *diversiloquium*. As Vico explains in the *Art of Rhetoric* allegories are not independent tropes but they express the use of many tropes (metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche) together.³⁶ With allegories the first men devised the “imaginative genera”, the first myths. The linguistic operation they make is to give names to idealized behaviors, as in the case of Achilles and Ulysses which are the names for the idealized behaviors of valor and prudence, respectively.³⁷

This operation is also described in Axiom 49 and in Book 4 where Vico explains that the first men could not abstract through “genera”, but they could imagine through “portrayals”.³⁸ Here Vico means that the personification of the idealized behaviors is always experienced in concrete terms and never theorized in abstract terms. In Axiom 49 the metaphorical operation is described as “univocal” not “analogical”: in the mentioned example of Ulysses and prudence, all the men who behave accordingly are themselves “Ulysses”.³⁹ They are a repetition of Ulysses. This operation of personification of an ideal type is the earliest stage of the metaphoric language.⁴⁰

According to Battistini, Vico’s understanding of tropes has a gnoseological function.⁴¹ Battistini notes that it is already in a “Notae” present in “Diritto Universale” that Vico reflects that religions and myths are produced by using a metaphoric language. Here Vico describes the children's behavior and notices that when they do not know how to call a thing, they identify the thing in connection to the causes and effects that the thing has (metonymy).⁴²

The mental process of the early men, as of the children, is to personify passions and things (Axiom 37). The means through which humankind personifies the world is the metaphor, “[t]he most luminous, because most necessary and the most frequent” of the tropes since “it

³⁶ Vico, *The Art of Rhetoric*, p. 147.

³⁷ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 147 (§403).

³⁸ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 368 (§933).

³⁹ Battistini gives the same interpretation, Battistini, *Vico tra antichi e moderni*, p. 193.

⁴⁰ Battistini sees analogies with the concept of “Idealtypus” of Max Weber and Auerbach’s concept of “figura”. Battistini, *Vico tra antichi e moderni*, p. 192.

⁴¹ Andrea Battistini, “Tradizione e innovazione nella tassonomia tropologica vichiana”, *Bollettino del Centro di Studi vichiani Vol. III*, 1973, p. 79.

⁴² Andrea Battistini, “Tradizione e innovazione nella tassonomia tropologica vichiana”, *Bollettino del Centro di Studi vichiani Vol. III*, 1973, p. 79.

gives sense and passions to insensate things”.⁴³ Vico observes that “the majority of expressions concerning inanimate things have been made by transferring to them features from the human body and its parts, and from human senses and human passions.”⁴⁴ For this reason “head” means for example “top” and it is used in all the possible circumstances, in the same way all the parts of the body can have metaphorical applications. Metaphors from human experiences are used in order to describe natural phenomena, as in the plants that “fall in love”, or in agriculture, as in the expression “the fields are thirsty”.

Vico says that the same logic applies to metonymy, as in Jove who becomes so “small and light that he is carried in flight by an eagle” and to synecdoche where “particulars [are] raised to universals”.⁴⁵ Battistini reflects that it is from synecdoche that Vico probably elaborates the concepts of imaginative universals and poetic characters. In the case of Ulysses, if someone is called “Ulysses” it is because the qualities of prudence become prevalent to other qualities and the one who is named Ulysses is therefore recognized only in relation to these qualities.⁴⁶

It is interesting that Vico also mentions “irony” as one of four tropes of the language, but this trope does not exist in the first ages. The reason is that irony always implies a reflection over a falsehood “that takes on the mask of truth”.⁴⁷ The first men, Vico explains, are not able to lie and therefore they are not able to reflect over irony’s falsehood.⁴⁸

Vico concludes his considerations about metaphors with a reflection which clearly refers to the discussion about the geometrical method:

For, just as rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them, so this imaginative metaphysics demonstrates that man becomes all things by not understanding them; and perhaps this latter statement has more truth than the former, for man, by understanding, articulates his own mind and comprehends those things, but, by not

⁴³ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 147-148 (§404).

⁴⁴ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 148 (§405). In the reasoning about the use of metaphors in “On Poetic Logic” Vico quotes Axiom 1 which states that through metaphors “man makes himself the measure of all things (p. 74, §120).

⁴⁵ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020. The examples are in p. 147 (§402) and p. 149 (§407), respectively.

⁴⁶ See, Velotti, pag. 111; Andrea Battistini, “Tradizione e innovazione nella tassonomia tropologica vichiana”, p.79. See also Verene, *Vico’s New Science*, p. 252.

⁴⁷ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 150 (§ 408).

⁴⁸ Comedy uses “intelligible genera”, general ideas about ethical teachings, in order to create fictive characters. The difference between “intelligible genera” and “imaginative genera” is that poets of later stages (the third age, as we will see soon) can create fictive characters out of abstract ideas (intelligible genera). As we have seen above, the “imaginative genera” are not based on abstract ideas but on concrete idealized behaviours, they are not fictive but real.

understanding, he makes those things from himself and, by transforming himself, become those things.⁴⁹

In the passage Vico contrasts rational and imaginative reasoning. The latter creates new knowledge and the first gives “comprehension” to the knowledge imagined.

In the passage Vico also explains that the work of repeating the human body in nature operates in both directions. First man creates the world by repeating himself, then he transforms himself in the things he created. This transformation is also a repetition because man repeats the things that he/she created (repeated) in order to create (repeat) himself. The body in Vico’s theoretical construction has the function of the concept “habitus” in Deleuze’s philosophy. Deleuze understands the modern concept of habitus as a “contraction” and language as the means we use to achieve this contraction with which we contemplate ourselves and the world outside in ourselves.⁵⁰

2.3. *The social interaction: sensus communis*

In this section I will explore the formation of the poetic language as the product of social interaction. In “On Poetic Metaphysics” and “On Poetic Logic” Vico employs the usage of sayings and popular expressions in order to explain concepts, as in *Jovis omnia plena* (all is filled with Jove), and in order to give examples, as for *Post aliquot mea regna vident mirabror aristas* (After a few ears of corn, I shall wonder to see my rule) which he employs in order to show the combined usage of synecdoche and metonymy.⁵¹

The reason why Vico employs proverbs, popular sayings and maxims is that he believes that popular knowledge is connected to a collective mind. In Axiom 22 he states:

It is necessary that there be, in the nature of human things, a mental language common to all the nations which uniformly attends to the substance of the things achievable within the sociability of human life and articulates that substance with as many modifications as these things are able to have throughout their many different aspects. This is what we experience as true in proverbs -that is, with the maxims of commonplace wisdom- which are

⁴⁹ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, page 148 (§405), Axiom 1.

⁵⁰ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 73-74.

⁵¹ The first saying is quoted in this study and appears in p. 136 (§379), the other in p.150 (§407), Vico, *The New Science*, 2020. As for the second example, it is interesting to note that the same expression is used by treccani.it in order to show an example of metalepsis, a trope used in classical Latin literature.

understood to be the same in substance even though they have so many different aspects as there are nations, ancient and modern.⁵²

According to Vico, all human languages have a common nature, and this common nature is the matrix on which all the national languages are molded. Proverbs are expressions of this common pattern, although they are “articulated” in different ways in the single national languages.⁵³

Proverbs as a form of “commonplace wisdom” relate to the doctrine of *sensus communis* because they are the “articulation” made by the single national language. Vico describes the doctrine in Axioms 11-13. In Axiom 13 it is stated that “uniform ideas [...] must have some common impetus” and “common sense” is “a criterion of judgement taught to nations by divine providence so as to define what is certain”. The single nations form their knowledge (the certain) under direction of the divine providence. The connection between *sensus communis* and the “certain” is a crucial aspect of Vico’s theoretical architecture. In Axioms 9 and 10 Vico compares “the certain” (*certo*) with “the true” (*vero*), on the one hand, and philology with philosophy, on the other hand. In the interpretation of the mentioned axioms, Verene explains that the “certain” is a manifestation of the human choice and it is related to the language, customs, laws, deeds and is subject matter of philology. The study of common principles is expression of the “true” and is the subject matter of philosophy.⁵⁴ The art of criticism explained in Axiom 10 can be defined as Vico’s scientific method (*scientia*) and combines the knowledge of both philology and philosophy and can be described as a reflection over the “certain” (philology) in connection to the general principles (philosophy) which apply it.⁵⁵

Sensus communis is expression of the particular knowledge developed by the single nations and is the means by which humankind can reach the “certain” (which is also called “the verisimilar”).

⁵² Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 82 (§161).

⁵³ With regard to the theory discussed in the introduction, it appears to me that the national proverbs which constitute the “commonplace wisdom” of the single nations can also be perceived as an expression of the “here and now (*hic et nunc*)” discussed in the introduction since they have “the same substance”, the same origin or repeater, “even though they have so many different aspects”.

⁵⁴ Verene, *Vico’s New Science*, p. 253.

⁵⁵ The only reflection over the “certain” (without applying the common rules of philosophy) is defined by Vico as “consciousness”, which means “awareness”, as we will see later in this study where I also clarify the difference between “*scientia*” and “*conscientia*”. See Verene’s comments about “*scienza*” and “*coscienza*” and “*nuova arte critica*”, *Vico’s New Science*, p. 254, 264, 266.

Logic comes from the term *logos*, which, in its first and proper sense signifies “myth” (favola) which is translated in Italian as “speech” (favella), and “myth” in Greek is also called *mutos*, from which comes the term in Latin, *mutus* (mute); [...] Indeed, to this we can add the definition of *mutos* as a *vera narratio*, or true speech.⁵⁶

A key topic of *The New Science* is the courses of three ages, the age of gods, the age of heroes, the age of men, which correspond to three languages, the hieroglyphic-sacred language, the language by signs or heroic devices, the epistolary language.⁵⁷

In the quoted passage Vico starts his reasoning about the “poetic logic” with the reflection that the earliest men spoke the “true speech” in the hieroglyphic-sacred language which was mute, constructed with the human body in order to express the most violent passions. The aim of this language was to communicate with Jove in order to reach their salvation.⁵⁸

In the “Corollaries concerning the earliest nations speaking through poetic characters”, Vico reflects that social interaction produces common knowledge and he explains that Aesop is a poetic character made by the plebeians in order to promote their interests.⁵⁹ Plebeians were called *socii* according to Axiom 79 because they accepted to serve the “fathers” in exchange for protection.⁶⁰ In Axiom 79, Vico defines *socii* as “companions whose goal was the sharing of advantage among themselves”.⁶¹ Axiom 79 is related to Axiom 12, regarding the *sensus communis*, where Vico says that the common sense is some knowledge “sensed in common” by a whole order, a whole people, a whole nation, a whole humankind.⁶²

The poetic character Aesop can therefore be described as the product of a shared knowledge of a group of people who had something in common: their subjugated position under the

⁵⁶ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 146 (§401).

⁵⁷ It is a key reasoning in *The New Science* and appears in all the books. In the chapter “On poetic logic” the reasoning about the three languages begins in p. 160 (§432), *The New Science*, 2020.

⁵⁸ Aurbach compares, on the one hand, Vico’s early societies who are violent and driven by strong passions and, on the other hand, the idealized primitive societies conceived by the German romantics. He observes that Vico’s vision is completely different, although his work must have been known somehow by the romantics. Auerbach, “Vico and aesthetic historicism”, p. 190.

⁵⁹ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 155-156 (§425-426).

⁶⁰ It is interesting to note that “father”, which Vico interprets as the head of a family which also includes servants, etymologically is constructed from the sound *pa* which was repeated as in *papa* and ascribed first to Jove (*patrare* in Latin means to create) and after to all the “fathers” who first could speak to Jove through divinatory rituals. These first theological poets (the “fathers”) gained their dominant positions in the earliest societies by virtue of their ability to interpret (whose etymology originates from *patrare*, according to Vico) the divine auspices. See Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 171-173 (§448-449). The theme is also treated in “On Poetic Metaphysics”, p. 137 (§381).

⁶¹ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 96 (§258).

⁶² Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 78 (§142).

dominance of the fathers.

In the formation of the poetic character Aesop is important to understand how the *socii* could share the common knowledge. The concrete terms through which they shared and constructed this common knowledge must have been very similar to the process of interaction described by Vico in Book 3, with regard to the greatest of the poetic characters: Homer.

Not unlike the Homeric rhapsodists were those Cyclic poets, who preserved all of Greek mythical history from its beginning with the gods up until the return of Ulysses of Ithaca. These poets, so called from the word “kuklos”, could not have been other than idiotic men who sang myths to common peoples gathered into a circle around them at festivals.⁶³

In relation to the fact that these poets were nothing other than “idiotic” men, Vico clearly refers to Axiom 12 where he says that “common sense is a judgment without reflection”.

Rhapsodists were “stitchers of songs”, songs which must certainly have been gathered by none other than their own peoples; similarly, they also meant for the word *omeros* to be derived from *homou-simul* (at the same time)-and from *eirein-connectere* (to bind together) - whence the word means [...] someone who binds together, or composes, myths.⁶⁴

Here Vico reflects that the “poetic character” Homer is a social construction made through a dynamic interaction between rhapsodists, who operated as “connectors”, and the common peoples who met at the festivals. The model for Vico are the Italian festivals during Renaissance and afterwards where performers made up poems while reciting and commenting them in front of the audience which had a very active role in the performance.⁶⁵

The intervention of the audience is a key element in the creative process. Many scholars have seen the influence of Vico’s rhetorical method. Marshall observes that in Vico the enthymematic mode, which attains the metaphoric association of ideas, assumes “the public to supply the necessary complements in order to render such speech intelligible”.⁶⁶ In the section “A rational history of dramatic and lyric poetic” Vico explains that the choir was originally the audience.⁶⁷

⁶³ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 349 (§856). The expression “cyclic poets” is also used by Horace, see Pinton, “Horace’s art of Poetry & Vico’s Poetic Philosophy”, p.144-145.

⁶⁴ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 348 (§852).

⁶⁵ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 349 (§856).

⁶⁶ David Marshall, *Vico and the transformation of Rhetoric in Early Modern Europe*, p. 83.

⁶⁷ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 360 (§911).

2.4 The social interaction: the common memory

In this section I will explore how the common sense is bound to the concept of memory. An interesting interpretation of *sensus communis* is proposed by Thora Ilin Bayer who reflects that Vico's mental dictionary (in Axiom 22 Vico speaks about a mental dictionary in connection to a mental language) can be associated with the Renaissance conception of the "theater of memory" where "the spectator entered on the stage facing an audience of images" that are "archetypes from which the human world arises".⁶⁸ For Verene mental dictionary and mental language have the same meaning and concern an innate language.⁶⁹

Vico reasons about the mental dictionary in "On Poetic Logic" and reflects that words as *paterfamilias* can be observed in fifteen different languages.⁷⁰ As observed above (in the footnote), the word *pater* (father) originated by repeating the sound *pa*. The grumbling of this sound, as described in the first section of the thesis, was an attempt to imitate the thunder which was perceived as a sign of the divinity. Vico's concept of *paterfamilias* is developed from the physical and emotional perception of fear. Fear for the power of nature, as we have seen, is associated with the sense of divinity, and the divinity is primarily connected with the need of salvation. The first men settled down, forced by fear, in search for salvation. All the myths in *The New Science* can be related to this innate and primordial need. Even the myth of Heracles (son of Jove) described in Axiom 63, which gives the ground to the births of nations, is bound to this need. The mental language must, therefore, according to my interpretation, relate to innate cognitive qualities of the mind which operate in relation to this need, and salvation for humans means chiefly socialization, collaboration in order to understand, through language, themselves and the world. The first act of socialization is carried out by men and it resulted in forcing women to live with them, and the first act men and women do together is to speak about "human ideas".⁷¹

The "theater of the memory" is nevertheless present in Vico's theoretical architecture. The "here and now" interactions which occurred during the festivals and at the religious meetings can be fully understood only if we are aware of the fact that the myths were created in a very

⁶⁸ Bayer, "Vico's principle of *sensus communis*", p. 1145.

⁶⁹ Verene, *Vico's New Science*, p. 256.

⁷⁰ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 170 (§445).

⁷¹ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 194-195 (§504-505).

long and slow historical process.

In the “Philosophical Proofs” of book 3 Vico explains that there must be a gap of at least four hundred years between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.⁷² Vico’s investigations are not only philosophical, but mainly philological and anthropological. He examines the way Homeric characters eat, if they bury the dead, and the ways they carried out trades with other populations. His analysis also considers the descriptions of the technology used in the paintings and in manufacturing of things.⁷³

According to Vico, the Homeric poems started to be created during the age of gods and it was fixed in heroic verses during the second age. During these long periods, the social process of confrontation and crystallization of the myths was put in place by groups of people in different places throughout Greece and regarded chiefly the recollection of the original myths. The *ars topica*, the art of finding new arguments which was used in order to create myths and poetic characters, is primarily an art of remembering.

In the chapter “On Poetic Logic”, Vico explains that the arguments must be found in a mental topography (*ars topica*)

And, first of all, it started by roughing out a crude art of topics – that is, the art of regulating well the first operation of our minds – teaching the commonplaces that must all be run through so as to know all there is in something that one wishes to know well – that is, fully.⁷⁴

The commonplaces are virtual places, *loci* in Latin or *luoghi* in Italian, which the poets together with the audience shall explore “fully”. The passage refers clearly to the description of *ars topica* made in *The Art of Rhetoric*.⁷⁵ At the beginning, during the hieroglyphic era, the mental arguments were probably devised with concrete images. For Vico, memory can indeed be connected to a visual representation of ideas and thoughts.

In the first section of Book 1 dedicated to the frontispiece of *The New Science*, which “serves for the reader to conceive of the idea of this work before reading it and to bring it

⁷² Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 338 (§803).

⁷³ With this respect, Auerbach observes that Vico understood that the Homeric poems “were not coherent works, but they are composed of many fragments from different periods of Greek early history”, *Vico and Aesthetic Historicism*, p. 195.

⁷⁴ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 191 (§497).

⁷⁵ In Chapter Thirteen of *The Art of Rhetoric* Vico explains that the arguments must be found in a virtual topography which is called “locus”. Hereafter Vico enumerates in which “loci” the arguments are located.”. Vico, *The Art of Rhetoric*, p. 29.

back to one's memory more easily [...]”, Vico explains that the illustration will function as a mental map for the reader who will be able to visually associate all the concepts and thoughts proposed in *The New Science* to concrete images.⁷⁶

Visualizing is for Vico the way to recall memories and, at the same time, a way to associate different ideas. In Axiom 50 Vico explains that memory is bound with imagination which is “nothing other than memory extended or composed”.⁷⁷

There is the proof that these histories must have naturally preserved the memory of people – through the first philosophical proof (about collective memory, my comment) mentioned above, that in the childhood of nations, they must have had wondrously strong memories [...] In such human need, the peoples, who were almost entirely without reflection, had the most vivid senses for sensing particulars, the strongest imagination for apprehending and enlarging them, the most acute ingenuity for relating them to their imaginative genera, and the most robust memory for retaining them. These faculties do belong, it is true, to mind, but they set their roots in the body and take their life in the body. Hence, memory is the same faculty as imagination, which consequently is called “memory” in Latin [...]. And thus, it has three different aspects: it is memory when it remembers things; imagination when it alters or counterfeits them; ingenuity when it gives them the compass and puts them into a congruous and settled order. This is the cause for the theological poets calling Memory the “mother of the Muses”.⁷⁸

For Sanna the concepts “fantasia”, “ingegno” and “memoria” are tied with each other because they operate simultaneously. Ingenuity (*ingegno*) is the faculty of quickly responding to a (corporal, in the early societies) need and consists in the mental operation of finding “a medium term” in connection with the stimuli that come from the external world.⁷⁹ Imagination (*fantasia*) gives humankind freedom to search the possible connections because it gives the faculty to “alter”, to “counterfeit” the perception of things, and in this way the associative mechanism can connect ideas and things that are very different from each other.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 5 (§1).

⁷⁷ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 90 (§211).

⁷⁸ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 343-344 (§819).

⁷⁹ Sanna, “Ingegno e memoria in Giambattista Vico”, p. 107.

⁸⁰ The arguments which one can use are in principle unlimited. In the chapter dedicated to *ars topica* in *The Art of Rhetoric* Vico says that the arguments that one can use in order to associate different ideas are the following: “definition, division, etymology (notation), the etymological connection of the words (*verba coniugata*), genus, species, the total, the parts, the truly efficient cause, the agent, matter, form, purpose, result, the subject, collateral circumstances (*verba adiuncta*) of either thing or person in place or in time.” He continues in his reasoning and explains that “[i]t is from this locus that the possibilities originate; furthermore, from these

Memory functions, in my view, as a “repeater” because remembering is an act of “contraction” of experiences and this “contraction” functions in combination with fantasy and ingenuity. Memory also has the function of “repeating” the “common mental dictionary”. Functioning as an “amplifier” of concrete experiences, the mental function of memory gives a concrete reenactment of the mental language attached to the innate need of salvation and socialization. The myths were created first out of natural and corporal instincts, after, in later stages, they have been elaborated, developed, expanded with the help of memory (which functions simultaneously with fantasy and ingenuity).⁸¹

The other crucial aspect is that memories are devised only via social interaction. It is only shared memories which gain significance. This appears evident in the definition of the “collective memory” described by Axiom 45:

Men naturally tend to preserve memories of the laws and the orders which hold them within their own society.⁸²

Collective memories tend to be preserved naturally by men since societies are constructed on a common memory and socialization, the civil world, is not conceivable without a common ground. Common memory as well as the “common mental dictionary”, which functions as an innate matrix, are *conditio sine qua non* for people not only to understand each other but also to live together and ground their own civilization.

The collective memory represents in Vico’s reasoning the transition from a cognitive to an ethical dimension. The ethical dimension is connected to the role of the divine providence and the concept of consciousness.

2.5 *The rational forces: Consciousness*

In this section I will explore the role of the divine providence in relation to the construction of consciousness and the concept of consciousness in relation to the comprehension of the world.

originate the antecedent, the concomitant, the consequent, the similar, the dissimilar, the congruent, and the opposed.” Vico, *The Art of Rhetoric*, p. 29.

⁸¹ Here I see also analogies with Deleuze. For Deleuze “repetition” is a relation between present, past and future where “the present is the repeater, the past is the repetition itself, but the future is that which is repeated” (Deleuze, page 94). Present is therefore a re-enactment of the past but also a repeater because it reduces the past to “signs” and passes it over to the future which becomes present and past.

⁸² Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 88 (§201).

The role of the divine providence as human driving force is the first principal aspect of *The New Science*.⁸³ The reason is that socialization and human salvation are related, and both depend on the intervention of the divine providence:⁸⁴

However, men, on account of their corrupted nature, are tyrannized by self-love, on account of which they pursue principally their own advantage. Hence, when they intend to keep everything advantageous for themselves and no share for companionship, it is not possible for them to place their passions under conatus so as to direct them toward justice. [...] Therefore, it must be by nothing except divine providence that he is held within these orders to pay homage, in keeping with justice, to the orders of familial, civil, and finally human society.⁸⁵

The divine providence influences human choice since it provides humankind with the virtue of prudence, the virtue which Vico understands as the steering force of human actions in connection with *conatus*.⁸⁶ It is only due to divine providence if humankind has created the myth of Jove searching salvation from the fear of nature, as well as it is only due to *conatus* (free will) if the first men decide to settle down and begin in this way the history of civilization.⁸⁷ The free will inspired by the divine providence is the driving force which leads humankind through all the phases of civilization and to the final achievement of self-consciousness.⁸⁸

In the sections “On Poetic Metaphysics” and “On Poetic Logic” Vico uses sayings in order to construct and legitimate his arguments. In the chapters I counted at least six maxims which Vico quotes without mentioning the author, and two of them are repeated two times. These quotations are all taken, with exception of one which is taken from Ovid, from Virgil. Two of

⁸³ See Corollaries of “On Poetic Metaphysics”, p. 139 (§385), Vico, *The New Science*, 2020.

⁸⁴ Divine Providence is defined by Axiom 5 which states that divine providence moderates human passions in such way that passions become virtues (p. 76, §129) and Axiom 7 which states that divine providence is a “lawgiving mind which from the passions of men makes the civil orders” (p. 77, §133,). Vico, *The New Science*, 2020. Verene explains that *providentia* in its etymological meaning relates to *prudencia* (prudence, in its classical meaning it is associated with the Aristotelian concept “phronesis”, my comment), see Verene, *Vico's New Science. A Philosophical Commentary*, p. 265.

⁸⁵ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 116 (§341).

⁸⁶ Vico explains that *conatus* is an internal human force which enables human beings to moderate their own corporal instincts. It is joint with “freedom of human choice” and “free will” and it is inspired by the divine providence. Prudence and conatus are therefore forces which overlap each other. See par.388, page 140. Vico, *The New Science*, 2020.

⁸⁷ “Conatus” is joint with “freedom of human choice” and “free will” since the humans, inspired by the divine providence, decided to freely contain their basic instincts (p.140, §388,). Vico, *The New Science*, 2020

⁸⁸ See also Auerbach, “Vico and aesthetic historicism”, p. 198.

them are used in order to show the usage of linguistic tropes, the others are all related to describe the transitional phases of human civilization.⁸⁹

The first two maxims are related to each other, both are taken from Eclogues (3.60) and concern the age of gods which begins with the sensing of nature (the first maxim) and the creation of the myth of Jove (the second maxim).⁹⁰ The first maxim speaks about the pervasive experience of the divinity in nature, the second is a reflection over the fact that the divinity is a poetic creation.

The other two maxims, the *Pauci quos aequus amavit Jupiter* (few whom fair Jupiter has loved) and *Jupiter omnibus aequus* (Jupiter is fair to all), is both from Aeneid, 6.129-130 and 10.112 respectively. The maxim *Pauci quos aequus amavit Jupiter* shows the passage from the age of gods to the age of heroes. The language of heroes is half mute and half articulate, it uses mostly signs, symbols and images.

Consequently, it was necessarily the case that heroic language at its beginning was extremely discomposed, which is the great source of the obscurity of myths, of which the myth of Cadmus would be a signal example. He kills the serpent; he sows its teeth; from the furrows are born armed men; he throws a great rock among them; the fight to death; and, finally, Cadmus himself is changed into a serpent.⁹¹

The myth of Cadmus is taken from the *Metamorphoses* (3.1-140; 4.563-603) of Ovid, although the author is not mentioned. According to Vico, the myth tells about the victory of the heroes (the few of the maxim) against the plebeians and the birth of the aristocratic powers. During this age, the function of the heroic language is to express and legitimate the power of the dominant aristocracy. The symbolic function of the language is associated with coins, property of land, weapons, military symbols.⁹²

The maxim *Jupiter omnibus aequus* regards the passage to the third age. The quotation

⁸⁹ The four maxims appear in p. 136 (§379), p. 141 (§389), p. 142 (§391), p. 152 (§415), Vico, *The New Science*, 2020.

⁹⁰ The maxims are *Jovis omnia plena* (all is filled with Jove) and *A Jove principium Musae* (The Muse begins with Jove).

⁹¹ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 171 (§446).

⁹² See in "On Poetic Logic" the section "Corollaries concerning the origins of languages and letters, and therein the origin of hieroglyphics, of laws, of names, of insignia of noble houses, of medallions, and of money; and, so, the origins of the earliest languages and literature of the natural law of the gentile peoples. Vico, *The New Science*, 2020.

appears in “On Poetic Logic” and is associated by Vico with “Solon’s famous saying *Nosce te ipsum* (know thyself)”.⁹³

It is with this reflection that the Roman plebeians started to move towards a civil liberty equal with the patricians and, in the end, changed Rome from an aristocratic to a popular republic [...].⁹⁴

Vico uses the Socratic adage (whose origin he ascribes to Solon) as a socio-political force through which plebeians become aware that their “minds are equal” to the minds of aristocrats and the differences depend on “differences in the organization of the body and from civil educations”.⁹⁵

In this process of collective self-awareness Vico outlines the role of Solon “the prince of the Seven Sages” who introduced this maxim which was “first, a civil teaching and, later, was translated into a metaphysical and moral teaching.”⁹⁶ Vico explains that Solon’s ethical teachings are associated with the parables of Aesop who is, as we have seen above, a fictive poet devised by plebeians, long before the Seven sages, in order to elaborate ethical examples whose function was, “by means of induction”, to build plebeians’ social awareness.

Hence, Socrates, father of all the sects of the philosophers, introduced dialectics with induction, which, later, Aristotle made complete with syllogism, which cannot stand without universal.⁹⁷

According to Velotti, Vico is referring in this passage to the “oratorical induction” which uses the comparison with similar cases.⁹⁸ The Socratic induction does not have “the universal” because it compares similar cases without abstracting a general rule. Plebeians’ awareness is connected to Vico’s concept of consciousness which, with regard to Aesop’s ethical teachings, concerns the fact that they became aware (because they reflect over) of the similarity of their minds with the minds of aristocrats, although they did not abstract a general rule.⁹⁹

⁹³ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 153 (§416).

⁹⁴ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 153 (§415).

⁹⁵ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 153 (§415).

⁹⁶ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 155 (§424).

⁹⁷ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 155 (§424).

⁹⁸ Velotti, p. 117.

⁹⁹ Vico analyses the Socratic induction in *The Art of Rhetoric*. In a passage taken from the chapter 30 (p.92), he quotes Cicero (*Pro Milone*) in order to show that two similar cases should have the same resolution.

"Horatius, accused of having killed his sister in the presence of Roman army for that reason was not condemned. In the same manner, neither should Milo be condemned for the reason that he openly confessed to having killed

Nosce te ipsum and *Jupiter omnibus aequus* are therefore related to each other and the first is a form of consciousness (which is a reflection/repetition) while the second is an abstraction (thus also a reflection and repetition) of general rules. The first is related to the Socratic induction and concerns the fact that by knowing yourself you compare yourself with the others and become aware that your mind is equal to the others'. Consciousness is a reflection over the poetic examples of Aesop which is a form of *sensus communis*, of the "certain".¹⁰⁰ The maxim *Jupiter omnibus aequus* (Jupiter is fair to all) is a philosophical reflection over the *sensus communis* and aims to abstract a universal rule: the maxim "Jupiter is fair to all" means that everybody (not only the plebeians) is equal because there are no differences between human minds.

In *The New Science* the concept of "consciousness" has chiefly a social dimension, but it concerns also the individual feigning of the self. Vico used the word "consciousness" (*conscientia* in Latin) in the mentioned work *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* where he comments Descartes's principle *Cogito, ergo sum* and observes that "the certitude that he (Descartes, my comment) is thinking is mere consciousness (*conscientia*), not science (*scientia*)".¹⁰¹ Vico's statement can be understood in connection with Axiom 63:

The human mind is naturally inclined to see itself with the senses, from without and embodied; only with great difficulty, and by means of reflection, does it come to understand itself in itself. This Axiom gives the Universal principle pertaining to etymology in all languages: names (words, my comment) are taken from physical objects (bodies, my comment) and the properties of physical objects (bodies, my comment) in order to signify things pertaining to the mind and the spirit.¹⁰²

Clodius." In the example the resolution applied to the first case should apply to the second because the cases are "similar". In the example the general rules can derive from that which Vico calls the "relational locus" and it can be the fact that the deaths of Clodius and of Horatius's sister came in both cases as a consequence of a "public" clash. The generalized "relation locus" is also the missing part in the "induction" which was after completed by Aristoteles with the doctrine of syllogism. It is also useful to remind that enthymeme and syllogism are related with each other (see theories in the introduction of this thesis).

¹⁰⁰ The "certain" is studied by "philology" which is thus connected to the concept of "consciousness" (see also my comments in the section "the social interaction: *sensus communis*").

¹⁰¹ Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, p.83.

¹⁰² Vico, *New Science*, 2020, p. 93, §236. I would translate "corpi" which Vico uses in the original version literally as "bodies" rather than "physical objects". I would translate "vocaboli" literally as "words" and not "names". In the original version Vico writes (Vico uses cursive in order to underline important words): *La mente umana è inchinata naturalmente co'sensi a vedersi fuori dal corpo; e con molta difficoltà per mezzo della riflessione ad intendere sé medesima*. Questa Dignità ne dà l'*Universal Principio d'Etimologia in tutte le lingue*; nelle qual'i vocaboli sono trasportati da' corpi, e dalle proprietà de' corpi a significare le cose della mente, e dell'animo. Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, p. 876, 2018.

In this passage the act of consciousness concerns the human mind which first perceives itself via the senses as something outside the body and afterwards, “with great difficulty, and by means of reflection”, it perceives itself as consciousness. According to my interpretation Axiom 63 is clearly related to Vico’s conclusive reasoning that emerges in the section dedicated to metaphors. Here he states that men “make those things from himself and, by transforming himself, become those things”.¹⁰³

From the combination of the two passages I can see three acts of knowledge (which I would also call acts of repetition). The first act is to repeat the body in order to devise the world (the age of the theological poets). The second act is to repeat the world in order to devise dominion over the world and the other men (the age of heroes). The third act is the act of consciousness. It is a reflection about the first two acts, and it devises the human mind, which all the men reckon to be equal in every human being (the age of men).

The reflection of the third age is a repetition according to Deleuze who observes that Vico’s third age plays the role of “signified” in relation to the other two.¹⁰⁴

In Axiom 63, Vico states that “words are taken from bodies and the properties of bodies in order to “signify” (brackets are mine, my comment) things pertaining to the mind and the spirit. The “words” clearly refer to the words created by repetition of the body in order to devise the external world, which now are used in order to signify, in the third age, the mind itself. The mind, therefore, reflects about itself by using the words it used in order to describe the external world, and by doing this, understands itself as consciousness.¹⁰⁵ Consciousness as a linguistic construction can apply to both the individual self and social groups because in its essence is an act of awareness of previous signifying acts.

2.6 *The role of the poets in the third age*

The role of poets in the third age is also related to the concept of consciousness. Battistini reasons about the role of Virgil in *The New Science*. He observes that Vico had a Latin education and his knowledge of Latin authors is visible in all his works and is more pervasive than the knowledge that Vico had about Homer and the Greeks. Nonetheless, Virgil has a

¹⁰³ The passage is quoted in the section “Emotional forces”.

¹⁰⁴ Deleuze, p. 93.

¹⁰⁵ It is useful to observe that Deleuze says that “repetition is a condition of action before it is a concept of reflection”, p. 90.

minor role in *The New Science* and this less visible presence is, according to Battistini, due to the fact that Virgil is a poet of the third age, the age of men.¹⁰⁶

Even so, as we have seen above with the quotations of the maxims, the presence of Virgil, and of Ovid is very widespread in *The New Science* and the reader finds Virgil and Ovid in almost all the sections of *The New Science*. But why does Vico not mention their names? The answer can be found in Book 2 where Vico reveals, almost casually, the “arcane”. Before quoting a maxim, he writes “this is the civil history preserved by Virgil”.¹⁰⁷

The “maxim” is a quotation of Aeneid 4.242 and explains openly which role Vico ascribe to poets of the third age. Virgil, as well as all the poets of the age of men, has the role to “preserve” civil history. This may sound as a contradiction with what Vico states in “On Poetic Logic” where he says that “poetry is nothing else than imitation” and after he specifies that “the arts are nothing other than imitation of nature”.¹⁰⁸ Poetry in Vico’s theoretical architecture is certainly imitation of nature, and this is absolutely true as for theological poets, but not really correct as for Virgil and all the poets of the third age. Poets of the third age do not imitate nature, they reflect over and preserve history.

The explanation is to be found in the section XII of *De Ratione* about “Masterpieces of art. What drawbacks their existence produces. How these drawbacks may be got rid of”.¹⁰⁹

A considerable number of masterpieces seem to be of very special assistance in those intellectual activities which are based on imitation. There is a saying that, if Homer had not existed, there would have been no Vergil; and without Vergil, no Tasso.¹¹⁰

Vico continues his reasoning and says that the first works are always the best and the works which come after can never reach the same level.¹¹¹ For this reason, he exhorts students (*De Ratione* is the inaugural speech to the academic year 1708) to avoid reading these masterpieces in order to get their own personal way to imitate nature. Vico over time changed his mind and in the inaugural speech of 1732 (*De mente heroica*) claimed that students have

¹⁰⁶ Battistini, *Vico tra antichi e moderni*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁷ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 303, (§717).

¹⁰⁸ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 191 (§498). The passage is also quoted in the section “Emotional forces”.

¹⁰⁹ Here the *De Ratione* is quoted in the English translation *On the study methods of our time*.

¹¹⁰ Vico, *On the study methods of our time*, p. 70.

¹¹¹ Here the influence of Horace is very clear. See Pinton, *Horace’s art of Poetry & Vico’s Poetic Philosophy*, p. 144.

to follow the examples of the great masters.¹¹²

For Vico knowledge is an obstacle to imagination. This concept is very clear in *The New Science*: wonder, ignorance and curiosity are related to each other and are the necessary conditions in order to make new knowledge, in the form of the verisimilar (the certain). His reasoning is the following: only a pure imagination, not influenced by previous knowledge, can imitate nature and produce new knowledge, and therefore knowledge alone cannot be the ground for a new knowledge but can only be a reflection over the previous knowledge, and this reflection is for Vico consciousness or, when it applies common rules, is philosophy and art of criticism.

If the poets of the age of men has the function to “preserve” the civil history, in the ages of gods and in the age of heroes the poets’ role is to “cast upon the stage heroic hatred, contempt, wrath, and vengeance, which arise from sublime natures, and out of these natures naturally comes sentiments, words, and actions of a kind capable of ferocity, crudity, and atrocity and whose trappings inspire wonder”.¹¹³

In Book 3 Vico mentions many examples of poetry, many from the Italian tradition (Dante, Boiardo, Ariosto, Petrarch), and reasons that all these poets tell true stories and all of them are historiographers because they reveal the character of the nations. The difference between poets of the first two ages and poets of the third age concern the quality of the poems, since, as for the latter, “the art of poetry and the art of criticism serve to make our ingenuity cultivated, not great [...]”. The poets of earlier stages make true portrayals and ethical examples which ground the civil nations, the poets of the third age reflect and preserve these histories. But the risk for the latter is to fall in the falsehood.

Hence, we defined maxims on life, because they are general, as the sentences of philosophers; and reflection upon the passions similarly belong to false and rigid poets”.¹¹⁴

Poets of the age of men are like philosophers, their art is reflection not imitation of nature and it can be expressed in maxims, but it cannot express true passions. Poets of the age of men, on the one hand, cannot imitate nature but can only imitate poets from earlier stages and, on the

¹¹² Vico, *De mente heroica*, p. 57.

¹¹³ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 340 (§808). It is important to underline the importance of the influence of Horace’s *Ars Poetica* in Vico’s considerations about the inimitable character of Homer and ancient greeks. See for example Pinton, “Horace’s art of Poetry & Vico’s Poetic Philosophy”, p.143.

¹¹⁴ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 345 (§825).

other hand, display an art of criticism, which consists of a reflection over passions, but this can lead to a false understanding of history.

Auerbach commented with bitter critic Vico's understanding of Dante's *Divina Commedia* as the poem of Italian barbarism. Vico described Dante as a poet of an early stage when the imitation of nature was not much influenced by previous knowledge and poets could also portray the bloodiest events of history. That is why Vico commented, according to Auerbach, that Dante would have been a greater poet if he did not know anything about scholastic and Latin.¹¹⁵

In Axiom 36 Vico states that “the more vigorous the imagination, the weaker reasoning is.”¹¹⁶ The reason why the sublime is necessarily associated with imagination and not with reason is explained in a passage in Book 3:

Because of this, there remain two properties eternal to poetry: first, the sublime in poetry must always become united with popular sensibility; and, second, the people from whose earlier labors come these poetic characters cannot later look upon human customs otherwise but in terms of the conspicuous characters so brilliant and exemplary.¹¹⁷

In the passage emerge two ideas that are related to each other. The first regards the essence of the poetic language whose main function is to feign nature through a collective interaction. The second is that this collective production of knowledge, which consists of “imaginative genera” and “poetic characters”, is the foundation for later knowledge which always must relate to it.¹¹⁸

In “On the Poetic Metaphysics” Vico explains the reason why poets of the third age do not have direct access to nature:

However, even nowadays (because the nature of our human minds, even for the common run, is so withdrawn from the senses by the many abstractions which fill our languages with their many abstract terms, and has been rendered so subtle by the art of writing and, as it

¹¹⁵ Auerbach, *Studi su Dante*, p. 101-102.

¹¹⁶ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 86 (§185).

¹¹⁷ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 341 (§809).

¹¹⁸ As we have seen, imaginative genera and poetic characters are a form of personification of psychological characteristics (imaginative genera) and ethical values (poetic characters), feigned by common people. The interaction in the act of collective devising of the external world was characterized by violent passions.

were, so spiritualized by the use of numbers that even the common run know how to count and to reckon), it is naturally denied to us to be able to form an image of that vast goddess we call “sympathetic nature”: we say the words with our mouths, but it holds nothing for us in our minds (insofar as what we hold in our minds is false and so is nothing), and there is no succor any longer from the imagination in being able to form some vast, false image.¹¹⁹

The language of the third age, the age of men, is too abstract, too subtle, disconnected from the body. For Vico spoken and written language came at the same time because they were “connected”.¹²⁰ In the first stages images, acts, gestures were bound with sounds. The first way of speaking was by singing and “the founders of Greek humanity”, already from the earliest stages, “sang in heroic verse”.¹²¹ The myths, the poetic characters, were created together by singing. At the beginning the theological poets, and then the rhapsodists in connection with people gathering at the religious gatherings, and at the festivals, sang together in order to remember. By singing they feigned the myths and the imaginative genera. In the third age the language has lost the connection with the body and its collective functioning.

For, just as the letter ‘a’, for example, is a grammatical character invented to provide uniformity for the infinite number of different vocal sounds [of the same kind] that we articulate as grave or acute, or, to provide an example of the other type, the triangle is a geometrical character designed to provide uniformity for the innumerable figures of angles of different size formed by the juncture of three lines at three points, so the poetic characters are found to have been the elements of the languages in which the first gentile nations spoke.¹²²

In this passage quoted from the first edition emerges that the third language was designed in order to vehicle graphically a contraction of all the possible sounds which can be abstracted by the single “grammatical characters”. The letter “a” can consequently be repeated infinite times with infinite nuances of sound. In the third edition Vico explains that “hieroglyphics

¹¹⁹ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 135 (§378).

¹²⁰ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 158 (§429).

¹²¹ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 179 (§468). As we have seen, the choir in the tragedy was originally the public who participated in the performance.

¹²² Vico, *The First New Science*, p. 154 (§261).

and heroic letters were contracted to a few common alphabetic letters”.¹²³ The third language is accordingly a repetition of the previous two so that the sounds and the visual parts of the early languages merged in one single linguistic system. The discovery of letters was therefore a “peak of ingenuity” because they could “mediate”, within the same system, between linguistic functions related to the visual and functions related to the voiced. The third language can also be described as a mental contraction of the corporal languages (voice, gesture, images) which, in this way, are internalized in the mind. The other aspect of the alphabetic language regards the fact that language does not need physical presence in order to interact because the alphabetic language can be written down in books and transported, everyone can read them and reflect about what is written down. The type of interaction which occurred in the first and the second age is reduced and, consequently, the human mind becomes, throughout a long historical process, abstracted and disconnected from the body. For Vico, the body is the way to socialization and salvation. Without socialization humankind is doomed to a new form of barbarism: the barbarism of reflection. This new form of barbarism is driven by an individualistic hunger for satisfying personal pleasures. In the “Conclusion of the work” Vico describes the barbarism of reflection as follows:

Given that such a people become accustomed to thinking in a fashion no different from the beasts – each thinking of his own particular advantage – and given that such people in the last stage of refinement or, to put it better, arrogance, is inclined to resent and lash out at whatever trifle happens to displease it, in the fashion of wild beasts, thus, not matter how great the throng or press of their bodies, they live like brutal beasts in an extreme solitude of spirit and will. Through all of this, and by stubborn factionalism and hopeless civil wars, they go on to make forests out of their cities and lairs of men out of these forests; in this fashion, over long centuries of barbarism, they come to corrode the misbegotten subtleties of malice-filled ingenuity, which by the barbarism of reflection has turned them into wild beasts more brutal than those in the earlier barbarism of the senses.¹²⁴

In this passage Vico speaks about “malice-filled ingenuity” and refers to a deteriorated form of contracted and abstract language which leads to a form of hedonistic egocentrism characterized by the loss of the social dimension. In the same paragraph Vico explains that

¹²³ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 176 (§460).

¹²⁴ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 448 (§1106).

sociability is necessarily associated with a sense of piety, faith and truth. Here Vico clearly refers to the Latin concept of *pietas* which is related with a sense of duty and devotion towards nation, family and friends.

3. Conclusions

At the end of Book 4 Vico says that “in sum [...] man is only mind, body, and speech, and [...] speech somehow stands midway between mind and body”.¹²⁵ All Vico’s philosophical architecture is built around those three elements. Speech is the “medium term” between the body and the mind because the mind, as well as the external world, is a repetition of the body. Speech is therefore in its essence an act of repeating. The first repetition occurs “unaware” when the mind repeats the body in order to create the world, the second act is “aware” because it is an act of reflection with which the mind creates itself. *The New Science* develops ideas that Vico first conceived in *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* where he writes that “from body, it has extracted or, as they say, abstracted, shape, motion”.¹²⁶ Through the repetition of the body men have discovered the “metaphysical points”, the basis of the language, which, through “motion”, or through the human “faculty” of repeating them, forms the language which devises the human knowledge.¹²⁷ Human knowledge is a form of “organizing” natural elements by means of language and for this reason “the true” and “the made” are the same.¹²⁸ The kind of motions (which can also be called repetitions) are of two different sorts: the first is the linguistic and collective interaction which works with imagination, ingenium and memory in order to devise the external world, and the second is a “reflection” which is the linguistic construction of the individual mind. As for the first motion, Vico uses the metaphor of “seminal form” which, “insofar as it manifests itself progressively, is changed and made more perfect”.¹²⁹ The plant grows from the seed in unpredictable terms. Vico explains that this growth does not occur by “fortune” but by

¹²⁵ Vico, *The New Science*, 2020, p. 416 (§1045).

¹²⁶ Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, p. 76.

¹²⁷ In Chapter 7 Vico reasons about “faculty” that is the human ability to feign. Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, p. 76.

¹²⁸ Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, p. 93-94.

¹²⁹ Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, p. 87.

“industry”, which is a word that Vico associates with “ingenium”.¹³⁰ The “imagination” of the world is proper to poets of the first and the second age. The language used is mute and half mute, and with this Vico means that it is expressed mainly with sounds (men at the early stages sing together), it applies corporal gestures, acts, it uses images, symbols in order to speak to the divinity and get the symbolic appropriation of the external world.

Vico uses the word “speech (favella)” instead of language in order to remark that speech works only in the “here and now”, and these concrete situations are the collective gatherings (festivals, religious meetings) where people devise the world by sharing emotions.

“Reflection” is for Vico connected to the concept of “consciousness” which for Vico means “awareness” and it is typical of the third age. The plebeians become aware that their minds are equal to the minds of the aristocrats through poetry which is a sharing of ethical teachings. The act of being aware and conscious is a reflection because the object of this collective reflection is the imagined world by the theological poets in the first age, and by the heroes in the second age. The act of reflection is a repetition of the act of devising the world and, through this operation of reflecting, the “certain”, achieved during the previous ages via *sensus communis*, becomes “true”, which means that the “certain” becomes nearer to the divine “truth” which is not reachable by humans.¹³¹ The act of reflection in its essence is of the same nature as the act of devising the world. In *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* Vico explains “invention cannot be certain without judgment, nor can judgment be certain without invention” and with this he means that “ingenuity” (together with memory and “fantasia” which are connected with ingenium) applies also to the act of reflection. In the third age the role of poets is to “preserve” civil history. The act of preservation is chiefly an act of reflection over historical events. The language used is the alphabetic language which is highly abstract and “subtle” because it derives from the previous languages. With “abstraction” Vico means that the elements of the previous languages (sounds and graphics) merge in one linguistic system. By doing this the language becomes less dependent on

¹³⁰ Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, p. 135. In the other sections of the work dedicated to “memory” and “imagination” Vico explains, in the same way as he does in *The New Science*, that ingenium is connected to imagination and memory (p. 127-128).

¹³¹ “Science” is connected to the concept “reflection” and “consciousness” and regards the common rules which apply to *sensus communis* (the certain).

physical sharing with other people.¹³² The individual mind constructed in this way has feebler connections with the emotional forces (body and sharing) and for these reasons human beings can (or will necessarily) fall over into a new age of barbarism which Vico calls “the barbarism of reflection”.

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¹³² It is interesting to note that Vico thinks that books can negatively influence the process of ingenuity (See *On the study methods of our time*, p.72).

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