

## HERACLES AND THE PASSAGE FROM NATURE TO CULTURE IN G. VICO'S *LA SCIENZA NUOVA*

### ANCIENT MYTHS ARE HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

In order to explain ancient myths rationally, Vico claims that one must affect to have no erudition whatever (in his words, “*ridursi in uno stato di somma ignoranza di tutta l’umana e divina erudizione*”), for myths are not fables but accounts of the beginnings of civil history as primitive minds, comparable to the minds of children, might have been expected to relate them. Later thinkers who dwelled on these “narrations” with their own civi-

Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to Sections of *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, Revised Translation of the Third Edition (1744), translated by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1968.

lized minds, failed to seek in them the very framework of the primitive and poetic world they described.<sup>1</sup>

For Vico, the ancient myth is a “*vera narratio*” not an allegory. It is primitive historiography. Consequently, Heracles is not a fanciful conceit meant to represent the beginning of human labor and the founding of a nation. He is the first man in history who tilled the soil for the first time, settled in one place for the first time, and started the first family as the first form of organized society. He is a “poetic” character in that primitive man was obliged to represent in the only language available to him, that is, in emphatically sensory, concrete and physical terms, the aspects of his “*corso*” from nature to culture.

Moreover, there are many Heracleses<sup>2</sup> in mythology because in various parts of the primitive world there came a time when the fear of natural elements compelled one man to leave the forest behind, shelter himself and his female companion in a cave and find a way of providing food that did not leave too much to chance.

#### THE “*VERO*” AND THE “*IRONIC*” HERACLES

Heracles, whose name means “glory of Hera” is human, not divine. He alone, of all the Greek gods, began as a hero and was raised upon his death to the status of god in Olympus. His ambiguous nature of semi-god (born from an adulterous Jove and a mortal woman) is an “ironic” element in his human life, which leads to his “ironic” deification and immortality. Of this ambiguity, G.S. Kirk in his *The Nature of Greek Myths* writes: “Finding an underlying harmony in Heracles is something the ancients did not succeed in doing”<sup>3</sup> and he adds that this is owed to the Greeks being preoccupied with “contradictions be-

<sup>1</sup> “It is equally beyond our power to enter into the vast imagination of these first men, whose minds were not in the least abstract, refined, or spiritualized, because they were entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, buried in the body.”

<sup>2</sup> “...Varro was able to enumerate a good forty Herculese among the ancient nations...” (761).

<sup>3</sup> G.S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths*, New York, Penguin Books Ltd., 1974, p. 203.

tween Nature and Culture".<sup>4</sup> However, Vico explains the "contradictions" by distinguishing the "natural" or "vero" Heracles from the "cultured" hero, the latter being a "*riflessione*" upon the "vero" one, that is the result of a modification from primitive poetic descriptions to abstract thinking following the transition from the age of heroes to the age of men. Thus Vico discusses the death of Heracles only briefly because he believes that the "vero" man who tilled the soil must have died of natural death, whereas the "ironic" death of the hero, whose parts had to be separated by fire so that the immortal parts might be free to ascend to heaven, is an "ironic" interpretation of the "*vera narratio*", that is, the work of learned minds.<sup>5</sup>

#### PROFANE AND SACRED HISTORY

Vico would have history be a "*scienza nuova*" that begins with attention to mythology because "*le favole furon le prime storie delle nazioni gentili*".<sup>6</sup> He says "gentile nations" because he sees human history as involving two parallel developments. One is the history of the Hebrew people, whose origins are to be found in the Bible. The other is the history of gentile nations narrated in Homer's works and in the Law of the Twelve Tables. The Hebrew people, who lived isolated ignoring the existence of other human beings, had "*aiuti straordinari dal vero Dio*", whereas the gentile nations received "*ordinari aiuti dalla provvidenza*", hence the distinction between sacred and profane history.

But as a true science requires understanding of its principles, profane history, not sacred history, is the proper subject of "*La scienza nuova*".

The primitive man, the "*bestione*", was able to understand Jove because he had created him with his "*robustissimi sensi e vastissime fantasie*". Therefore man is able to understand the history of gentile nations in so far as he is the creator of it. On the other

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>5</sup> "Irony certainly could not have begun until the period of reflection, because it is fashioned of Falsehood by dint of a reflection which wears the mask of truth." (408).

<sup>6</sup> (51, 331).

hand, man cannot understand the “*vero Dio*” because he did not make him, hence God remains above and beyond human comprehension because of His superhuman and supernatural essence.

#### THE “*BESTIONI*” AND JOVE

According to Vico, mythology originated in Greece where fables were first told about bestial and savage giants that roamed the forests after the great worldwide flood. Vico explains that those primitive creatures, born from promiscuous intercourse, must have been abandoned by their savage mothers as soon as they were weaned and left to wallow in their own excrements, whose nitrous salts were absorbed by their bodies which became robust and excessively vigorous. Their brute force was also due to the continuous exertion of penetrating the thick forest. “From these first men, stupid, insensate and horrible beasts, all the philosophers and philologists should have begun their investigations of the wisdom of the ancient gentiles, that is from the giants...”<sup>7</sup> Vico supposes that when the earth had dried out from the moisture of the flood, it exhaled dry matters that ignited in the air producing lightning. Those *bestioni* who expressed their savage passions by shouting and grumbling, pictured the sky to themselves as an immense, animated body they called Jove, who by the hurling of his bolts and the noise of his thunder was attempting to tell them something. Their terror of natural elements, that is, their sense of religion, forced them into the habit of being hidden and settled in one place. Out of fear of thunder, God and morals were born in the mind of the primitive man, who hid in a cave with one woman only, thus forming the first family. What was later called “moral virtue” started with effort or “*conato*”.

With this *conatus* the virtue of the spirit began likewise to show itself among them, restraining them from finding satisfaction for their bestial lust in the sight of heaven, of which they had a mortal terror. So it came about that each of them would drag one woman into his cave and would keep her there in perpetual company for the duration of

<sup>7</sup> (374).

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their lives. Thus, the act of human love was performed under cover, in hiding, that is to say, in shame; and they began to feel that sense of shame which Socrates described as the color of virtue.<sup>8</sup>

Such was the origin of marriage consummated under the fear of divine powers. This chaste carnal union gave rise to the solemnity of the auspices of Jove taken from the thunderbolts. Thus Heracles, born by Jove to be the founder of primitive communities, signified the prudent, just and temperate man who was strong, industrious and magnanimous because he had "piety" and took counsel from the auspices of the god. And indeed, having piety and taking counsel from the auspices of the god became possible only when primitive man's terror of the elements had made him god-fearing; in all the gentile nations a sense of religion was the first civilizing influence.

### FINDING THE "VERO" HERACLES

"The first *sapienti* of the Greek world were the theological poets who undoubtedly flourished before the heroic poets, just as Jove was the father of Hercules", thus exemplifying that the gentile nations "could not have been founded without religion and could not grow without valor".<sup>9</sup> The myth of Heracles, therefore, is for Vico a useful model of the role of the hero in the process "by which the fierce and violent were brought from their outlaw state and by which nations came to be instituted among them."<sup>10</sup> Following are some examples of how Vico interprets elements of the Heracles myth so as to extract from it the "*vera narratio*" which its "ironic" language conceals.

A. Heracles' greatest and most glorious task was the killing of the Nemean lion. The following summary of this labor from Robert Graves "*The Greek Myths*"<sup>11</sup> will be useful for appreciating the skill of Vico's interpretation.

<sup>8</sup> (504).

<sup>9</sup> (198, 199).

<sup>10</sup> (178).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, New York, Penguin Books Ltd., 1955, Vol. II, pp. 104-105.

...Heracles visited Mount Tretus, and presently descried the lion coming back to its lair, bespattered with blood from the day's slaughter. He shot a flight of arrows, but they rebounded harmlessly from the thick pelt, and the lion licked its chops, yawning. Next, he used his sword, which bent as though made of lead; finally he heaved up his club and dealt the lion such a blow on the muzzle that it entered its double-mouthed cave shaking its head—not for pain, however, but because of the singing in its ears. Heracles, with a rueful glance at his shattered club, then netted one entrance of the cave, and went in by the other. Aware now that the monster was proof against all weapons, he began to wrestle with it. The lion bit off one of his fingers; but holding its head in chancery, Heracles squeezed hard until it choked to death. Carrying the carcass on his shoulders... he took (it) to Mycenae... For a while, Heracles was at a loss how to flay the lion until, by divine inspiration, he thought of employing his own razor-sharp claws and soon could wear the invulnerable pelt as armour and the head as helmet.

According to Vico, in the “*vera narratio*” the lion must have been the earth and the labor the “*molta, dura fatiga a ridur(la) a coltura.*” Every detail of the mythic task is easily identifiable with the various steps of the strenuous process of working the hard soil for the first time to prepare it for sowing. The lion, full of blood of the day's slaughter, represents the previous unsuccessful attempts by other men; the rebounding of the arrows, the bending of the sword and the shattering of Heracles' powerful club signify the hero's own failure to penetrate the rocky soil; his going to a different entrance of the lion's cave represents his moving to a softer lot of land where the fight proves to be fruitful, not without struggle and physical pain, culminating in the final victory of cultivating the land. The carcass is the decomposition of the former “beasts” into land now tamed and made to bear ears of corn; the difficulty in skinning the lion represents the effort directed to finding how best to cut and harvest the grain. The invulnerability of the pelt represents the reliability of farming as a way of insuring food supply more organized and more congenial to “culture” than hunting. Where finding foods was previously left to chance, the heroes, now settled in one place with their growing and more numerous families to feed, are forced to clear forests and create new fields to grow grain. This was done in accordance with their religion which taught them to set fire to the forests that surrounded their lands in order to have a

prospect of the open sky from where the auspices came.

B. The classical mythographers (e.g. Hesiod, Pausanias, Euripides, Apollodorus, Servius) were divided in their interpretations of the second labor performed by Heracles, the killing of the Lernaean Hydra. Some held that it might have been a huge and venomous watersnake whose “very breath or the smell of its tracks could destroy life”. Others believed it to be the source of underground rivers which used to burst out and inundate the land. No sooner did Heracles cut off one of the snake’s heads than two or three others took its place. No sooner did Heracles block one of the rivers, than water would break through elsewhere. In the first version, Heracles succeeds in killing the Hydra by searing the root of each of its heads with fire as soon as he had cut it off. In the second version he first uses fire to dry up all the ground and then closes the channels.<sup>12</sup>

In Vico’s “*vera narratio*”, on the other hand, the Hydra is described as “*cangiante di tre colori*”: black (the burnt-over land), green (the leaves) and gold (the ripe grain), these being the three colors of the serpent’s skin which is sloughed off and replaced by another when it has grown old. The Hydra thus represents what follows after Heracles has killed the Nemean Lion, that is, the now cultivable and cultivated land.

C. Heracles’ eleventh labor was to fetch the golden apples from the tree guarded by the fire-breathing dragon in Hera’s divine garden of the Hesperides. The myth, according to Vico, is a great metaphor for the harvest of golden ears of grain following on the tilling of the land (the Nemean Lion) and its cultivation (the Hydra), for “these three different stories, from different parts of Greece, signify the same in substance”. The great dragon is the land itself which is covered with scales and spines (thorns and briars), has wings (for the land belongs to the heroes), and is always awake and watchful (thickly grown).

D. *The Heracleian Knot*: the three labors that have been explained are intended to show forth, “the glory of Hera”, as a virtuous hero (that is, Cicero’s *vir* “of widespread fame for services to mankind”) for his effort to domesticate the wilderness to man’s needs. The famous “*nodo erculeo*” illustrates, accord-

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

ing to Vico, Heracles' role in the realization of the second form of society after marriage, civil government. In marriage, the "*vera amicitia naturale*" ties husband and wife together in their sharing of the three final goods: the honorable, the useful and the pleasurable. Men were driven to marriage by religion (a pious motive) and by the natural instinct to perpetuate the human race (a gentle one). The second form of society involved the addition of the "*famuli*", refugees who came for asylum from the hardships of the forests, that is, out of necessity. The "*famuli*" were received by the heroes under the just law of protection in exchange for whatever labors the heroes required, hence the creation by Heracles of the first form of civil government, the aristocratic commonwealth.

The Herculean knot is, therefore, the commitment by which the clients were said to be "*nexi*" or tied to the lands they cultivated for the nobles. The Gallic Hercules "who chains great masses of men by the ears with poetic gold coming out of his mouth and leads them wherever he wishes", represents the hero for whom the "*nexi*" cultivated the fields and shared only in the labors, not in his winnings or in his glory. Vico, therefore, disproves the common belief that the first form of society was a monarchic one. He also points out that the gold coming out of Heracles' mouth could not have been persuasive speech as it was interpreted by later thinkers because primitive men merely uttered savage sounds. In addition, grain was indeed the first gold in the world "for at that time metallic gold was still unmined and they did not know how to extract it in crude masses, to say nothing of shining and burnishing it".<sup>13</sup>

Men who were neither noble nor "*nexi*" were "unhappy people or impious vagabonds—men in aspect but beasts in their habits" and were thus considered enemies or strangers to be hunted or at least avoided. Heracles' various killings of monsters and his fifth labor, the cleansing of the stables of Augeias, are interpreted by Vico as explanations of that primitive custom which the hero later abolished by performing his tenth labor, the killing of the cattle of Geryon. In commemoration of his generous

<sup>13</sup> (544).



deed, Heracles built a city which Vico views as the first hospice for strangers.

E. *The fame of Heracles*: Vico explains the spreading of Greek mythology to other lands by assuming that the Greeks, “*uomini boriosi*”, started traveling around the world and made widely known the achievements of their heroes. In foreign lands, they observed a type of nation-founder they named after their hero in order to earn more glory for their homeland. This explains why Heracleses abound in ancient myths. According to Vico the name of Heracles was adopted by the Romans as they started to “*ingentilirsi*” from their barbarism and took pleasure in foreign tongues, wares and fashions. Hence they gladly exchanged Fidius, their true founder, for Hercules or Heracles.

#### *HERACLES REDUX*

One of Vico's most significant insights is his cyclical theory of historical development, which he calls “*corsi e ricorsi*”. The “*corso*” of a people starts with a “barbarism of sense” followed by an age of gods, then an age of heroes, and finally an age of men or “fully developed reason” (*ragione spiegata*). However, as “fully developed reason” is itself liable to corruption, the way is paved for a new development (*ricorso*) with stages similar to the “*corso*” except that the new trials and tribulations appear to be worse because in a time of “barbarism of reflection” men are more inhuman than men were in time of “barbarism of sense”. “For the latter displayed a savage generosity against which one could defend oneself or take flight or be on one's guard; the former, with a base savagery, under soft words and embraces, plots against the life and fortune of friends and intimates.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, “Heracles” must be expected to return because as “the nature of peoples is first crude, then severe, then benign, then delicate, finally dissolute”<sup>15</sup> a people undergoes a cycle of “*barbarie della riflessione*” where man is forced to confront trials and tribulations of a primitive physical nature no matter how learned his mind may be.

<sup>14</sup> (1106).

<sup>15</sup> (242).

These ideas are striking for their topicality. The Age of Enlightenment did not think of the enlistment of enlightened minds for enslavement that brings back a barbarism of sense like that so amply dramatized for us by accounts about life in the labor and concentration camps of this century.

Viktor Frankl, a leading Austrian physician spending three years in a concentration camp, writes of becoming “disgusted with the state of affairs which compelled me daily and hourly to think of ... trivial things ... What would there be to eat tonight? If a piece of sausage came as an extra ration, should I exchange it for a piece of bread? Should I trade my last cigarette for a bowl of soup?”<sup>16</sup> And in Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Shukov, a political prisoner spending eight years in a Russian labor camp, goes to sleep at night feeling “very happy. He’d had a lot of luck today. They hadn’t put him in the cooler. He’d finagled an extra bowl of mush at noon. He’d bought some tobacco. And he’d got over that sickness.”<sup>17</sup>

The men described in these accounts are intellectuals caught in a “*ricorso storico*” in which the physical labors they must endure are not, like the labors of Heracles, directed at realizing the possibility of living as creatures with “fully developed reason” (men) afterward, but labors intended to accomplish just the opposite and insure the limitation of their value to whatever physical strength they have left. Consequently, these men resort to the gratification of their lower needs for a sense of well-being. The labor and concentration camps, in the context of Vico’s ideas, may be seen as “*malnati*” tangible symbols of “*ingegni maliziosi*” in highly civilized societies reverting to a stage of “*barbarie della riflessione*” for having lost their sense of religion or “piety” which, according to Vico, is the principal basis for all forms of government, for “one who is not pious cannot be truly wise”—words that prophetically conclude Vico’s work.

<sup>16</sup> Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, New York, Pocket Book Inc., 1977, p. 116.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, New York, Bantam Books Inc., pp. 202-203.

THE VISION OF VICO

How did the “*bestione*” become a human being? How did creatures whose minds were “immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, and buried in their bodies” become men? How did an unsocial animal in the forest become the social animal without which cities and nations would have been impossible and inexplicable? Since return to the state of “*bestione*” is possible, what provides for the possibility of human recovery, as the concept of “*ricorso*” implies? Indeed, how did the “*bestione*” avoid self-destruction? How was it possible at all for the “*bestione*” to enter on that “*corso*” at the end of which there were human institutions? The answer which Vico writes *La Scienza Nuova* to give and which in conclusion it would be inexcusable to fail to state at least in outline is: the “*bestione*” himself created the human being he became and, if this human being becomes a “*bestione*” again, the same “*bestione*” will make himself human all over again because the influence of the “*aiuti*” of Providence is not ever, and has never been, absent even in the narrow, shortsighted, and misguided motives by which the actions of men have been inspired.

For though men themselves made this world of nations—and this became the first indisputable principle of this Science, since we despaired of discovering a science (of these matters) among the philosophers and philologists—it has without doubt been born of a mind often unlike, at times quite contrary to and ever superior to, the particular ends these men had set themselves, which narrow ends, made means to serve wider ends, it has always used to preserve the human race on this earth. Thus men would indulge their bestial lust and forsake their children, but they create the purity of marriage, whence arise the families; the fathers would exercise their paternal powers over the clients without moderation, but they subject them to civil powers, whence arise the cities... (Finally) the nations themselves dissolve, but their survivors seek safety in solitude whence, phoenix-like, they are born anew. Yet that which did all this was mind, for men did it with intelligence; it was not fate, for they did it by choice; nor was it chance, for, to the end of time, by their ever acting thus, the same things are born.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> (1108).

Vico's meaning here is clear. Of course, it was ignorance and misguided reason that made the "*bestione*" imagine Jove and feel fear when he heard thunder and saw lightning, but that he thought of a deity was not an error and the sense of religion he gained from his fear served the purpose of Providence. Next came the comprehension characteristic of the heroic age that auspices justified the uses of strength and conferred authority, starting first with patriarchal authority, followed after by whatever new forms of authority the course of class struggle required for the maintenance of stability since "it is characteristic of the strong not to lose by sloth what they have acquired by valor. Rather do they yield, from necessity or for utility, as little as they can and bit by bit."<sup>19</sup> This also served the purpose of Providence. Consequently, according to Vico, Epicurus, Hobbes and Machiavelli were mistaken in imagining that chance explained the rise of human institutions, as were also Zeno and Spinoza who favored determinism or fate.

The answer, then, to the questions which were asked at the beginning of this section is *emotion*. According to Vico, in the true (Christian) religion the mind, influenced by grace to seek an infinite and eternal good, supplies to the emotions the motives for virtuous action. In gentile man (and, therefore, the false religions), on the other hand, the goods proposed being finite, ephemeral, and corporeal, the emotions "must drag the mind towards doing works of virtue" which, of course, are works that Providence has wisely ordained should be dictated by their necessity and utility. For example, legislation

considers man as he is, in order to create of him good practices in human societies: as, from violence, avarice and ambition, which are the three vices prevalent throughout the whole of mankind, it creates the army, commerce and the court, and thus the strength, wealth and wisdom of states; and from these three vices, which would certainly destroy the human species on earth, it creates civil happiness. This axiom proves that divine providence exists and that it is a divine legislative mind which, from the passions of men concerned only for their own personal advantage, in pursuit of which they would live as wild beasts

<sup>19</sup> (261).

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in solitude, has created the civil orders through which they may live in a human society.<sup>20</sup>

### THE POETIC QUALITY OF *LA SCIENZA NUOVA*

Scholars, Vico repeats often, have failed to appreciate the heroic myths as sources of historical information because they have tended to attribute their poetic quality to art (like their own) when they ought to have suspected the influence of poverty of language. "Doctrines must take their beginning from the beginning of the matters of which they treat." Since the new science is committed to begin where its subject-matter began and its task is the explanation of human institutions, the task of the new science must be to proceed as if to create human institutions or be present at their creation. Hence, to understand the world of the first men, the myths must be used to affect being in that world oneself. And this, compared to everything else scholars have said about the greatness of *La Scienza Nuova*, seems to have been the best-kept secret respecting the explanation of both its neglect until recent times and its final success: that *La Scienza Nuova* is literally a poem that Vico somehow managed to avoid spoiling with his own enormous erudition even as, at every step, he was obliged to rely on it.

To discover the way in which the first human thinking arose in the gentile world, we encountered exasperating difficulties which have cost us the research of a good twenty years. (We had to descend) from these human and refined natures of ours to those quite wild and savage natures which we cannot at all imagine and can comprehend only with great effort.<sup>21</sup>

Vico seemingly succeeded in descending from his refined mind to perceive that solitary land of primeval forest and its giants as if he had intensely lived on it. His poetic insight captured the sensation those primitive "*bestioni*" must have experienced at the awakening of human consciousness as if he were recollecting them.

<sup>20</sup> (132, 133).

<sup>21</sup> (338).

Vico's depiction of the primordial scene with the thunderbolt lacerating the sky at the beginning of human history is remarkable for the raw beauty of the images it evokes:

*i giganti dalla spaventosa religione de' fulmini furono incatenati per sotto i monti, e tennero in freno il vezzo bestiale d'andar errando da fiere per la gran selva della terra...*<sup>22</sup>

Vico's choice of words, "*spaventosa*", "*incatenati per sotto i monti*" and the alliterations "*d'andar errando da fiere... della terra*" all convey an unforgettably awesome feeling. Something only a poet can do.

Professor H.P. Adams, referring to how long *La Scienza Nuova* suffered neglect (it is useful to remember that though published in Naples in 1744, the first English translations did not appear until after World War II), writes that Vico "experienced as fully as any great poet, for the *Scienza Nuova* is a great poem, the solitary recompense attained in creation. He had 'the divine joy in this mortal body to contemplate in the divine ideas this world of nations in their whole extent of places, times, and diversities.' It was the joy he promised to his readers, but generations were to pass before they entered the land he had seen from his height of contemplation."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> "The giants, enchained under the mountains by the frightful religion of the thunderbolts, learned to check their bestial habit of wandering wild through the great forest of the earth." (504).

<sup>23</sup> H.P. Adams, *The Life and Writings of Giambattista Vico*, New York, Russell and Russell, 1970, p. 219.