Artistic practices of historical sound: memory, imagination, and mimesis in contemporary composition and historical performance

Diaz, C.A.

5_The New Science of Giambattista Vico

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Vico is bizarre. The philosopher Louis Dupré warned in 2004 that, "even today, a first encounter with *The New Science* is disconcerting."[1] This should not be taken lightly. Given the breadth of its intellectual scope, the extreme idiosyncrasy of its vocabulary, and the distance at which its basic conceptual framework sits from any modern knowledge system, an engagement with *The New Science* [1725/1730/1744], the three published versions of which constitutes nearly the entirety of his later intellectual work, is likely to come across as at best esoteric and at worst simply absurd, not to mention extremely sexist and racist. But if one is willing to push through this discomfort, they may also find an astonishing and valuable form of understanding that can be extracted from within this chaos.

We can choose to see the degree to which Giambattista Vico's [1668–1744] later epistemology is not only bizarre but also *unthinkable* to the modern reader as a marker of its great potential to positively influence present-day musical practice. I believe it will be essential to overcoming the overwhelming hegemony of an objectivist historiography and the oversimplification of artistic invention that are the dual impetuses behind this dissertation. In a sense, it's not dissimilar to Ann Stoler's or Stephen Wright's efforts, as detailed above, to dissect the latent value systems and structures of knowledge that underpin modern thought, and to capture the slippery, shape-shifting obstacles they place in the way of even the most well-meaning projects of social change. Stoler develops her concept of 'aphasia' as a way of pinning down the inconspicuous persistence of colonial power structures long after new states have won 'independence' from their colonizers.[2] Wright employs his phrase, 'lexical capture' to describe the near impossibility of articulating what an artistic culture might look like beyond what he argues is an outmoded concept of authorship.[3] Their efforts to dredge deeper into knowledge and meaning

[1] Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 189.

[2] Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 12.

[3] Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013), 1.

production within their respective fields or, in other words, to render visible not only the invisible but the *unimaginable*, may hold a key to understanding Vico in a similarly productive way, and in a way that might reveal a path forward from the paradoxical contradictions and impossibilities I see within the bifurcated field of artistic practices in classical music right now. In other words, a peek behind the veneer of received knowledge systems is always disconcerting.

Also, much like Stoler and Wright, Vico's effort in *The New Science* is also significantly to do with language—in his terms, it's a *philological* exercise.[4] On a surface level, he seeks to discover what ancient and pre-historic cultures—the 'first peoples'—meant by the language they used, and thereby how they understood the world they inhabited. But what starts to happen over the course of the book is that he gradually develops an entirely new idea of what language is and why it has changed so drastically over time. This deeper level of linguistic interpretation allows Vico to make the remarkable move of claiming to know humanity's prehistory—to know about human social events that took place before humans began writing, and without the use of archaeological evidence. He finds a logical rationale for using ancient Greek mythology as a rubric for understanding Native American cultures, Roman law to describe Egyptian religion, and so forth, all of which grants him access to knowledge about cultures for which concrete, factual evidence is entirely absent. But most importantly, he develops through this philological and (pre-)historical exercise a novel *epistemology,* which he asserts holds significant value for philosophers, politicians, and other cultural leaders in his own present and in the near future.

I should be clear—and this is probably one of the most disorienting things about reading *The New Science* for the first time—that I am not concerned with whether Vico's particular beliefs about particular ancient cultures and deep historical events and chronologies are *true*. What I'm interested in are the novel understandings of knowledge and its communication that he puts forth as rationale for those beliefs.

[4] "Philosophy contemplates reason, whence comes knowledge of the true; philology observes that of which human choice is author, whence comes consciousness of the certain. This axiom by its second part includes among the philologians all the grammarians, historians, critics, who have occupied themselves with the study of the languages and deeds of peoples: both at home, as in their customs and laws, and abroad, as in their wars, peaces, alliances, travels, and commerce." Giambattista Vico, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico: Unabridged Translation of the Third Edition (1744) with the addition of "Practic of the New Science"* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1948), 63.

This rationale differs from the scientifically-derived certainty we usually think about when we say 'knowledge' within or after Modernism. I'd also like to segment my interest in Vico's historiography even further, as many other analyses of or references to his writing over the course of a long 20th century—including Dupré's—have focused on the *universality* of his historiography as something akin to the mechanistic teleology of Marxism. Vico declares in no uncertain terms that every nation goes through the same three phases of development—the divine, the heroic, and the human—and that this trajectory can be mapped onto contemporary cultures by anyone at any time in any place in order to understand how those cultures, too, will inevitably progress into egalitarian, democratic, proletarian nations. I don't doubt the pertinence of Vico's thought to projects interested in such types of social or political theory, but my own interest in Vico has little to do with this aspect of it. Simply put, I'm interested in Vico's concept of the poetic and how it fuses memory with imagination, and subjectivity with objectivity, in a broad reconsideration of historical epistemology and contemporary rhetoric.

My own experience with Vico tells me that Dupré's use of the word 'disconcerting' was an exercise in understatement. I myself felt nothing short of bewilderment upon first reading *The New Science*. But this angst and my exposition of it here will, I believe, demonstrate the resilience of the historical practitioner and the creative artist—the persistence of our ability to reframe theory and revitalize practice against all odds—and the possibility that it is perhaps only in these moments of disconcerting rupture where the formulation of powerfully new knowledge is possible.

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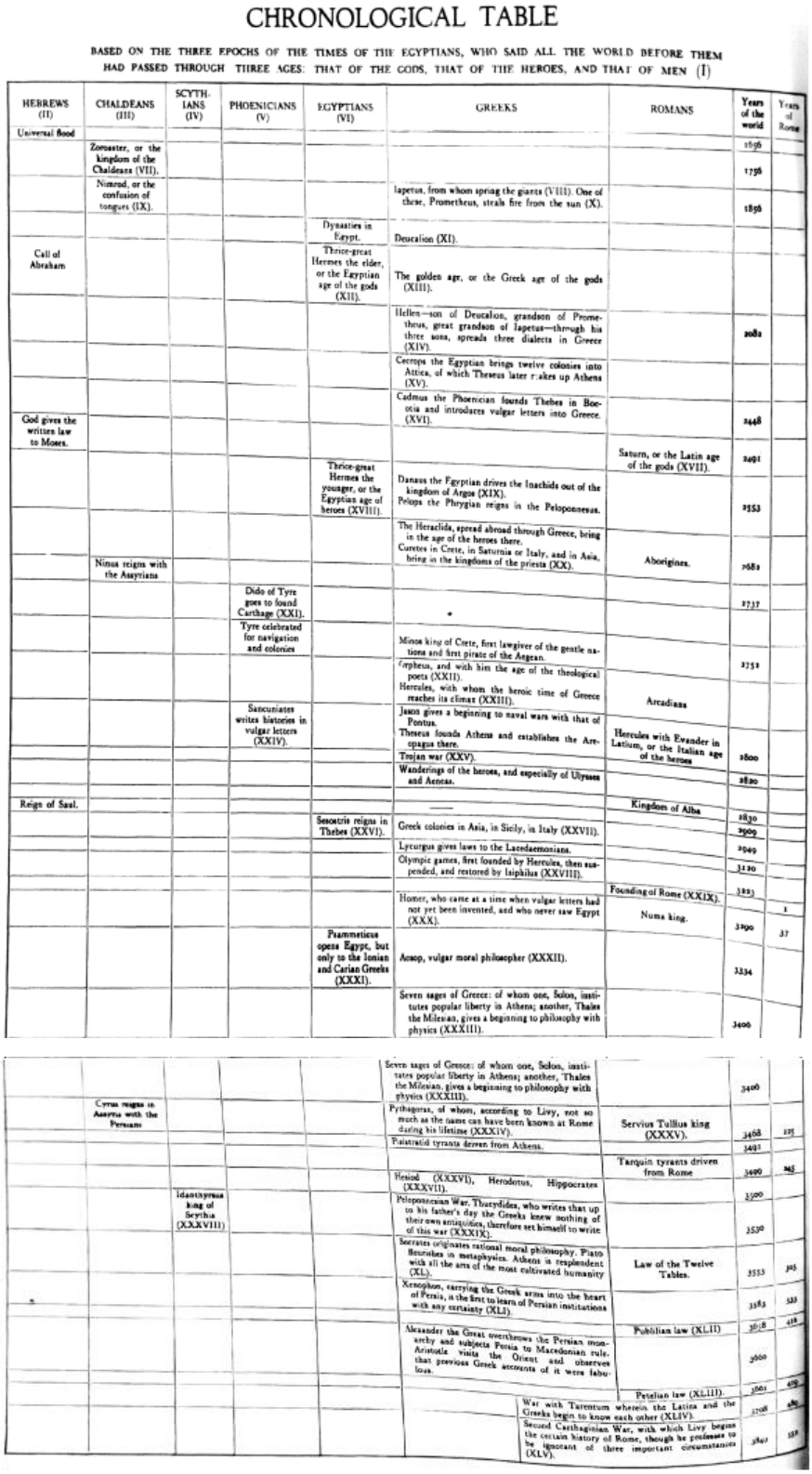
After setting out his 'idea of the work' via a highly detailed description of an allegorical frontispiece, Vico opens his argument in the 1744 edition of *The New Science* with a chronological table of the history of what he calls the 'first nations' of the world—Hebrews, Chaldeans, Scythians, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans—and how each of their independent national histories line up with each other in time.[5]

[5] Ibid., 28.



CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

BASED ON THE THREE EPOCHS OF THE TIMES OF THE EGYPTIANS, WHO SAID ALL THE WORLD BEFORE THEM HAD PASSED THROUGH THREE AGES: THAT OF THE GODS, THAT OF THE HEROES, AND THAT OF MEN (I)

HEBREWS (II)	CHALDEANS (III)	SCYTHIANS (IV)	PHOENICIANS (V)	EGYPTIANS (VI)	GREEKS	ROMANS	Years of the world	Years of Rome
Universal flood							1656	
	Zoroaster, or the kingdom of the Chaldeans (VII).						1756	
	Nimrod, or the confusion of tongues (IX).				Iapetus, from whom spring the giants (VIII). One of these, Prometheus, steals fire from the sun (X).		1856	
				Dynasties in Egypt.	Deucalion (XI).			
Call of Abraham				Thrice-great Hermes the elder, or the Egyptian age of the gods (XII).	The golden age, or the Greek age of the gods (XIII).			
					Hellen—son of Deucalion, grandson of Prometheus, great grandson of Iapetus—through his three sons, spreads three dialects in Greece (XIV).		2082	
					Cecrops the Egyptian brings twelve colonies into Attica, of which Theseus later makes up Athens (XV).			
					Cadmus the Phoenician founds Thebes in Boeotia and introduces vulgar letters into Greece. (XVI).		2448	
God gives the written law to Moses.								
						Saturn, or the Latin age of the gods (XVII).	2491	
				Thrice-great Hermes the younger, or the Egyptian age of heroes (XVIII).	Danaus the Egyptian drives the Inachids out of the kingdom of Argos (XIX). Pelops the Phrygian reigns in the Peloponnesus.		2553	
					The Heraclids, spread abroad through Greece, bring in the age of the heroes there. Curetes in Crete, in Saturnia or Italy, and in Asia, bring in the kingdoms of the priests (XX).	Aborigines.	2682	
	Ninus reigns with the Assyrians							
			Dido of Tyre goes to found Carthage (XXI).				2737	
			Tyre celebrated for navigation and colonies		Minos king of Crete, first lawgiver of the gentile nations and first pirate of the Aegean.		2752	
					Orpheus, and with him the age of the theological poets (XXII). Hercules, with whom the heroic time of Greece reaches its climax (XXIII).	Arcadians		
			Sanchuniates writes histories in vulgar letters (XXIV).		Jason gives a beginning to naval wars with that of Pontus. Theseus founds Athens and establishes the Areopagus there.	Hercules with Evander in Latium, or the Italian age of the heroes	2800	
					Trojan war (XXV).			
					Wanderings of the heroes, and especially of Ulysses and Aeneas.		2820	
Reign of Saul.						Kingdom of Alba		
				Sesostris reigns in Thebes (XXVI).	Greek colonies in Asia, in Sicily, in Italy (XXVII).		2830	
					Lycurgus gives laws to the Lacedaemonians.		2909	
					Olympic games, first founded by Hercules, then suspended, and restored by Iaiphilus (XXVIII).		2949	
						Founding of Rome (XXIX).	3120	
					Homer, who came at a time when vulgar letters had not yet been invented, and who never saw Egypt (XXX).	Numa king.	3223	1
				Psammeticus opens Egypt, but only to the Ionian and Carian Greeks (XXXI).	Aesop, vulgar moral philosopher (XXXII).		3290	37
					Seven sages of Greece: of whom one, Solon, institutes popular liberty in Athens; another, Thales the Milesian, gives a beginning to philosophy with physics (XXXIII).		3334	
					Seven sages of Greece: of whom one, Solon, institutes popular liberty in Athens; another, Thales the Milesian, gives a beginning to philosophy with physics (XXXIII).		3400	
	Cyrus reigns in Assyria with the Persians				Pythagoras, of whom, according to Livy, not so much as the name can have been known at Rome during his lifetime (XXXIV).	Servius Tullius king (XXXV).	3468	135
					Pisistratid tyrants driven from Athens.		3497	
						Tarquin tyrants driven from Rome	3490	245
		Idanthyrsus king of Scythia (XXXVII)			Hesiod (XXXVI), Herodotus, Hippocrates (XXXVII).		3500	
					Peloponnesian War. Thucydides, who writes that up to his father's day the Greeks knew nothing of their own antiquities, therefore set himself to write of this war (XXXIX).		3530	
					Socrates originates rational moral philosophy. Plato flourishes in metaphysics. Athens is resplendent with all the arts of the most cultivated humanity (XL).	Law of the Twelve Tables.	3553	305
					Xenophon, carrying the Greek arms into the heart of Persia, is the first to learn of Persian institutions with any certainty (XLI).		3583	333
					Alexander the Great overthrows the Persian monarchy and subjects Persia to Macedonian rule. Aristotle visits the Orient and observes that previous Greek accounts of it were fabulous.	Publilian law (XLII)	3618	418
							3660	
						Petelian law (XLIII).	3661	479
					War with Tarentum wherein the Latins and the Greeks begin to know each other (XLIV).		3708	489
					Second Carthaginian War, with which Livy begins the certain history of Rome, though he professes to be ignorant of three important circumstances (XLV).		3802	583

Figure 5.1: The “Chronological Table” from the 1744 edition of Giambattista Vico's *The New Science.*

This table looks unfamiliar in a way that illustrates a crucial difference in historiographical priorities between Vico and many present-day academic historians. Instead of dating events according to the physical characteristics of the evidence that describes them, Vico dates them according to their conformity to what he sees as universal and absolute principles of human collective behavioural development. And he combines what are typically considered as separate chronologies—one mythical, the other historical.

It's easy to see how such a method may lead to a representation of the past that is less 'true' in the objective empirical sense typically used in the natural sciences. It may well transpire that an incorrect date is given for a certain event due to the greater emphasis he places on qualitatively assessing the type of spirituality exhibited in an archival document, than on material evidence about the method of production used to make the paper it was written on. But Vico's position is that the purpose of history is not to neutrally relay factual information about the past, but rather to investigate human nature in a way that effectively informs political action in the present. Vico's history is a mapping of human thought and action that cuts across the grain of Newtonian space-time, and between the Cartesian absolutes of reality and imaginary.

Vico is driven to this stance because of a lack of faith in humanity's ability to achieve knowledge of itself via the geometric method (i.e. scientific objectivity), and because of a preponderance of faith in humanity's ability to gain quite certain knowledge of its own creations (social institutions and mechanical arts), as discussed in Chapter Three. Here, he addresses the more positive side of this argument:

> In the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modification of our own human mind.[6]

This assertion that civil society is a human creation and can therefore be understood by the self-reflection of humanity is central to Vico's distinction between philosophy and philology; philology being "the

[6] Ibid., 96.

doctrine of all the institutions that depend on human choice,"[7] and philosophy being "the study of the world of nature."[8] Philosophers err, in Vico's formulation, by framing a *general* pursuit of knowledge around principles only rightly applicable to the study of purely physical phenomena. Implicit within this position is the belief that it leaves scholars wanting for an effective way to study human institutions, interactions, and experiences—the stuff of history. An impermeable division between subject and object, as is necessary for objective empirical science, leaves one unable to study either oneself or one's relation to the outside world.

This philological framing of the problem appears in Vico's work as early as his 1701 oration "On True Learning." Here, Vico expresses distaste for scholars who claim to know more than they do about ancient languages and who are therefore unduly condescending about ancient peoples:

> Ten years is not sufficient to learn the Latin language in order to appreciate fully its elegance and richness, even though today we speak a language derived from it with only a few changes. [...] And in a short time we pretend to know languages totally other than ours, even those no longer spoken! Authors of our times thoroughly acquainted with the Greek and Latin languages claim that Homer, compared to the example of Virgil, is sordid and inept, Demosthenes, compared with Cicero, is stale and frigid. Ah, listeners! To quote Sallust, we carry our faults into our occupations. Homer is not sordid, nor Demosthenes stale. It is we who do one thing and pretend to do another. It is our ignorance of this language that does not permit us to know how great is the weight of the function of its words, the elegance of its expression, the resonance of its sound.[9]

Vico goes on to disparage his Neapolitan contemporaries, who considered Homer inferior to Virgil merely because they were more accustomed to Latin than Greek (the former being more similar to Italian). In other words, their disdain for Homer has nothing to do with Homer, but rather with their own lack of cultural self-knowledge. This is why Vico goes on to take a Socratic turn in his argument, which he once again frames as a plea for humanistic over geometric methods:

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[7] Ibid., 6.

[8] Ibid., 96.

[9] Giambattista Vico, *On Humanistic Education (Six Inaugural Orations, 1699-1707)* trans. Giorgio A. Pinton and Arthur W. Shippee (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 85.

> Why do we pretend to impose on a man of sane mind geometric demonstrations which he cannot follow? Such a one, although he has unobstructed vision and is vigilant, is still not able to see the sun in full daylight, even though we know that the mind is attracted to truth as the eye is to light. Let us at last confess our natural limitations. Our studies are valuable insofar as we learn that we do not know or we know only a few things.[10]

The axiom underlying this passage and the last is that to learn is to build an understanding of the innumerable ways in which we do *not* understand and to build awareness of the innumerable things of which we are *not* aware. In a kind of inverse form of a Cartesian logic—building absolute compound truths out of simple facts—Vico advocates throughout *The New Science* for a method of blindly accepting as true even the most seemingly absurd statements or descriptions in ancient texts, and he then works to refine his understanding of their authors' language and culture such that such absurdities gradually begin to make sense. He assumes that *he* is the one lacking in knowledge, not the authors of the texts he reads. The corollaries that follow this passage are that, in the study of ancient languages and cultures, we must assume we know very little and so build up our knowledge from what historical authors tell us, divorced from our own beliefs about immutable certainties and historical events.

Vico refers to this problem as the "conceit of scholars." For Vico, it is problematic that his contemporaries believe that, "what they know is as old as the world," because this leads them to "convict of fraud the oracles" and to "condemn as impertinent all the mystic meanings [of the] hieroglyphs."[11] Instead, Vico's view is that the very earliest human writings must be taken as true, without question. But this doesn't mean simply employing a presentist reading of their words at face value, which in the case of ancient mythology would suggest that the basic laws of physics have changed drastically over the intervening millennia. What must be done instead is to seek understanding of how language might have functioned differently within ancient cultures in order for the received meaning to regain coherence. Instead of assuming oracles, fables, and myths represent ancient peoples' inadequate knowledge of the world around them, we should instead assume that we simply have an inadequate knowledge of how they're using language.

[10] Ibid., 89.

[11] Ibid., 61.

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Throughout *The New Science*, Vico likens the development of humanity as a whole to the development of any given human as an individual. Humanity in its early stages is as curious and imaginative as a child. Humanity in its latest stages is as wise and reflective—but also as jaded and inflexible—as someone very old. From this metaphor it follows that the first people of the world saw and understood their world as children of any time understand theirs. They lack abstract, universal ideas, and instead think only in terms of particulars. Because of a general "poverty of language and need to explain and be understood," [12] they speak through grounded metaphor. Vico calls this type of language "poetic locution." So "the first gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters," which were "certain imaginative genera (images for the most part of animate substances, of gods or heroes, formed by their imagination) to which they reduced all the species or all the particulars that appertain to each genus."[13] In other words, poetic characters were abstract concepts—ways of grouping together a number of particular objects or events under a single banner. Whereas modern languages use abstract concepts such as 'law' and 'power,' first languages use personified divinities such as 'Orpheus' and 'Jove.' This is why Vico argues that oracles, fables, and myths "contain meanings not analogical but univocal, not philosophical but historical, of the peoples of Greece of those times." Talk of Orpheus is not an analogy to Greek law, it is *explicitly* talk of Greek law. Orpheus is not a metaphor for law, he is simply the poetic character the ancient Greeks conjured in order to speak about what we now call law.

But it is not merely the case that moderns and ancients understood the world and spoke about it in the same manner, only using different words to name its parts. Wrapped up in this poetic locution is a visceral, grounded experience of the world that stands in stark contrast to the founding principles of the geometric method. Poetic wisdom takes the feeling and self-awareness of individual humans as essential ingredients in knowledge production. Whereas knowledge derived by the geometric method may have higher value in isolation, poetic wisdom is more useful in actual practice because it is produced through the *exchange* of common, habitual, instinctive, or otherwise pre-existing forms of knowledge. "Poetic

[12] Vico, *The New Science*, 22.

[13] Ibid., 21.

sentences [...] are formed by feelings of passion and emotion, whereas philosophic sentences are formed by reflection and reasoning."[14] Vico's first people were so utterly wrapped up in the world that the modern concept of objectivity, of removing oneself from a situation in order to reflect upon it calmly and neutrally, was totally non-existent. And it doesn't stop at objectivity either. Spirituality as we know it today—the belief that there is a higher power controlling the world—was also absent for Vico's first people. Instead, words we understand now to indicate divinities were merely names for tangible forces in the real world. It is a nonexistence of the *abstract*, of anything removed from immediate experience. And this nonexistence is profound for Vico. It speaks to the near total impassability of the intellectual distance between the first peoples and ourselves.

> It is [...] beyond our power to enter into the vast imagination of those first men, whose minds were not in the least abstract, refined, or spiritualized, because they were entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, buried in the body. That is why [...] we can scarcely understand, still less imagine, how those first men thought who founded gentile humanity.[15]

But it is the task of the historian/philologist/philosopher, the practitioner of 'the new science,' to bridge this gap. As the modern world is *not* the ancient, as the modern human speaks in the abstract while the ancient speaks in the poetic, the task to be done is to 'apply philosophy to philology'—to translate the impenetrable poetic language of the first peoples into an abstract form more palpable to modernity.

Vico starts this work of translation by citing and tying together examples of poetic locution from both ancient Rome and his own eighteenth-century Neapolitan present: "The farmers of Latium used to say the fields were thirsty, bore fruit, were swollen with grain; and our rustics speak of plants making love, vines going mad, resinous trees weeping. Innumerable other examples could be collected from all languages."[16] In one manner of speaking, this is the *giving* of human agency to inanimate objects and non-sentient life forms. But to say 'giving' already assumes a mode of natural philosophy that ought not be assumed. It assumes that these objects and life forms *in fact* do not have agency, and therefore need to

[14] Ibid., 76.

[15] Ibid., 118.

[16] Ibid., 129.

be given it, instead of being *in fact* nothing more than sensible phenomena, which humanity can then consign to modes of knowledge that understand them as either animate or inanimate. But one should not assume here that any structure of knowledge is fundamentally contained within its object. Knowledge can also be understood as a framework that is *mapped on top of* such objects through human ingenuity and agency. It should be remembered that the inanimacy of the physical world was not a given in Vico's time. Newtonian physics and Cartesian epistemology were undergoing active debate. So rather than *giving* human agency to inanimate objects and non-sentient life forms, we might instead consider Vico's poetic locution as a way of navigating a world in which what we now call inanimate objects and natural phenomena are very much active, thinking, feeling agents in the world. And Vico's first people experience human agency within these non-human entities *viscerally*. To say, "the fields were thirsty, bore fruit, were swollen with grain," is not a metaphor. Through these observations, "the farmers of Latium" bear witness as those fields *become* pregnant, as a human being might. Those fields were transformed into such a being and so are understood as able to exhibit all her agency.

Early humanity, then, is not rul*er* but *rule* of the world. It doesn't command the world, it uses itself as the world's system of measure. Vico's first people do not force their will upon the inanimate and the non-sentient parts of their world as modern people do. They interact with it as they do with other people. All those things they see in the world are actors in that world. Some are human and some are not, but all are treated as human. In Vico's analysis, this is the core metaphysical framework of prehistoric human culture:

> [M]an in his ignorance makes himself the rule of the universe, for in the examples cited he has made of himself an entire world. So that, as rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them (*homo intelligendo fit omnia*), this imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by not understanding them (*homo non intelligendo fit omnia*); and perhaps the latter proposition is truer than the former, for when man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them.[17]

[17] Ibid., 129-130.

The human body, mind, and soul are the rubric for understanding everything. One can understand the behaviour of animals by reflecting upon one's own behaviour. One can understand the interrelations between weather, geography, and agriculture by reflecting upon one's own interrelations with other humans. When it rains, we experience that rain alongside our environment, we commune with our neighbours in that environment through this shared experience of being rained upon, we *empathize* with dirt and trees and frogs and crops as all of us are wetted together. "The vulgar [...] say that the magnet *loves* the iron."[18] Our experience becomes their experience. What we come to know about these things is what we see both in them and in ourselves. And so knowledge has nothing to do with how things 'really are' independent of our experience of them. Rules that govern human behaviour, which are learned through reflection upon our own behaviour, our internalized experience of ourselves, become rules to govern the external, non-human, natural world.

Yet this is not only about a kind of mental agility but a pervasive embodiment of the world. It's just a different kind of metaphor that functionally still reaches abstraction through personification instead of an independent conceptual vocabulary. It's an instinctive becoming of the things with which one engages. It's an embodiment of others and objects in order to share ideas with others. For Vico, this is what makes understanding mythology so incredibly difficult for us, with our entirely literal minds. Knowledge of the other is fully elided with knowledge of the self. Vico's 'first people' lacked any ability to tell the two apart. And this was not their weakness but their strength. For Vico, it is *we* who are 'corrupted' by abandoning this elision.

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We can see here a reflexivity between Vico's own theory of knowledge and that which he gives to his 'first people.' Just as Vico himself believes that the only certainty humans can attain is that of human affairs—those institutions humans create—he also believes that the earliest mode of knowledge, that of these first people, was derived from humanity's understanding of itself. For Vico, the first principle of knowledge is the understanding a human has of itself—a knowledge built within the lens of human experience.

[18] Ibid., 70. Emphasis mine.

Everything else is derived from this, just as Descartes derives all knowledge from his own first principle that he thinks (*cogito ergo sum*). But the reflexivity of Vico's first principle gives it a powerful advantage over Descartes's in that Vico's is already the most natural metaphysical instinct of humans. Vico's philosophy makes for knowledge that is easier to grasp, and more effective to use in the real world, than Cartesian knowledge. Knowledge for Vico is the ability to anticipate how things outside one's own being will behave and how one might adjust one's own actions in order to interact with those outside things in an effective way. So if these 'metaphors' that assimilate non-human entities with human behaviour *function* to drive one's behaviour in such a way that is effective in the world, what advantage could purportedly objective knowledge of things 'as they actually are' hold? In what way is objective knowledge, that which is derived from the geometric method, superior to poetic wisdom? How is it better than the practical metaphysical knowledge developed by and communicated through poetic locution?

For Vico, it isn't. Far from being a self-sufficient metaphysical framework capable of delivering knowledge about the world on its own, the geometric method for Vico is a tool to be used for the parsing of meta-level methods for thinking through what is a fundamentally *humanistic* activity—phenomenological experience and reflection thereupon. As we saw above, he argued in his earlier lectures, predating *The New Science*, that an overemphasis of geometricism leads to the tripartite inability to identify significant lines of inquiry, pursue practical lines of inquiry, and communicate the results of inquiry. In contrast, the system of knowledge that Vico presents as "poetic wisdom" is one in which understanding of things *outside* oneself is vitally fused to understanding of what is *inside* oneself—one's *being*—and is therefore integrated with questions of social importance that are easily applicable to the context of practical concerns or embodied problems, and that are intuitively communicable. Objectivity is not only impossible, but undesirable.

Poetic wisdom is the seeing of the other *through* the self or *as* the self, but it is a far more expansive concept than simply an occasional use of metaphor to describe particular oddities or wonders of the world around us. It is more pervasive. It permeates both ancient and modern languages for Vico and it sheds light on and can serve as a meaningful apologism for ancient, non-Christian spirituality. The majority of *The New Science* is devoted to elucidating the precise meaning of the innumerable ways of

thinking and talking about divinities in antiquity. These ways of thinking and talking serve to naturalize polytheistic religions, particularly those of ancient Greece and Rome; to equate knowledge of the gods with knowledge of nature, in turn making what would otherwise be considered paganism into simply a pre-Christian science—one that was not at odds with Christianity and by which Christians had no need to feel threatened. Vico translates what at first glance appear to be descriptions of supernatural activity among gods who are sentient actors in the world, into sober descriptions of natural phenomena and human institutions. Gods are not supernatural agents acting wilfully upon humans but personified descriptions of abstract systems or structures such as law, government, metaphysics, agriculture, navigation, marriage, parenthood, and so on. Poetic wisdom is as expansive a knowledge system as geometricism or objectivity. It can be applied to any and every subject.

But poetic logic doesn't only replace geometricism or objectivity in regard to how knowledge is formed, it pre-figures a different concept of knowledge altogether; not simply an additional type of knowledge acting as a complement to geometric or objective knowledge, but a completely alternate idea of what knowledge is, what it's for, and how it's used. In the case of Christianity and Greek mythology, whereas objectivism renders the two wholly incompatible, poetic wisdom identifies them as merely alternate vocabularies and syntaxes for discussing essentially the same concepts and phenomena. A question such as, 'is there one God or are there many,' becomes moot. Both options are true. They're simply different ways of saying the same thing.

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To illustrate how this works in more detail and to begin to transition Vico's concept of poetic wisdom away from a general theory of knowledge and toward its functioning within more temporally contingent particulars as encountered in historical research, thereby setting up its potential for incorporation into contemporary historiography, I'd like to give an example of a poetic character whom Vico considers: Orpheus. Vico does not dedicate any discrete section of *The New Science* to Orpheus but rather weaves his mythology and meaning in and out of the argument while passing through the divisions of poetic wisdom. In Vico's description of the chronological table—his self-styled "confused and obscure" outline

of all the mythologies and histories of early humanity, which comes near the beginning of the book, before his argument about poetic wisdom—Orpheus is named as "a theological poet, who through the fables, in their first meaning, first founded and then confirmed the humanity of Greece."[19] This would suggest a human or superhuman individual: a great leader or king with the ability to unite a large group of people together into a single nation under his rule.

But when Vico first introduces Orpheus as "a vast den of a thousand monsters," he does so in reference to the absurd incongruence between this idea—that Orpheus is anything like a human at all, who lived and breathed on Earth and interacted with other real, living, breathing humans—and the claim that within his life "so many civil institutions are formed, for which the extent of a thousand years would hardly suffice."[20] Vico corrects for this incongruence in the way he does for so much else in *The New Science*. Rather than assuming that the first peoples were merely a bit foolish for believing that a single, real being called Orpheus could have lived for a thousand years and rallied together the entire Greek nation one family at a time, Vico steadfastly follows his axiom that it is rather his own and his contemporaries' literalistic understanding of the fables of Orpheus that are incorrect. So he tries to find the rational coherence within this mythology by adjusting his understanding of their language—by following a philological rather than philosophical methodology.

For this task, Orpheus's lyre is crucial. It precedes Orpheus himself in significance. The gestation of the Orphic character takes the trajectory of an organological history. Consider a simple explanation for the origin of the lyre: someone stretches a reasonably elastic piece of material and it makes a sound, and they like that sound; someone then discovers that something thin (like a piece of intestine as compared to a piece of wood) makes a particularly resonant sound when stretched, which they like even better; and finally someone then realizes that it's nice when several of these cords resonate at the same time, so the lyre as we know it is derived in order to facilitate that experience more easily. What's crucial here is not that this explanation of the history of the lyre is necessarily true but that it is plausible, because the concept of the lyre itself is used by Vico's first peoples as metaphor rather than evidence. When the early Greeks spoke of Orpheus's lyre, for Vico, they were not speaking about an actual lyre or its actual history

[19] Ibid., 44.

[20] Ibid., 42.

but about the idea of several taut strings organized to sound in harmony; when they were speaking of Orpheus himself they were not talking about an actual being who played an actual lyre but of someone capable of finessing harmony out of a strong material stretched and placed beside others of its kind.

To unpack the metaphors implicit in this character, Vico explains later on in *The New Science* that, "when the poets were still mute and spoke by physical things, they took the sinews for forces."[21] One use for this idea of sinews—the idea of force—was to describe a father's relationship to his family:

> Here we may reflect how much it took for the men of the gentile [modern, civilized] world to be tamed from their feral native liberty through a long period of cyclopean [propagated by nobility] family discipline to the point of obeying naturally the laws in the civil states which were to come later. [...] [D]ivine [deeply insightful, as in 'divination'] force was needed to reduce these giants, as wild as they were gross, to human duties. Since they were unable to express this force abstractly, they represented it in concrete physical form as a cord, called chorda in Greek and in Latin at first fides [whence comes 'fidelity'].[22]

In Vico's formulation, before there were nations with laws, but after the earliest people emerged from total barbarity by organizing themselves into families, the father of a family had ultimate authority. What a father in this early archetypal family unit did to keep his family together and to ensure harmony within its members was considered an expression of force. He structured the family in an act of power. So the harmonious family is the single sinew stretched into a taut cord that resonates with purity. It is a monochord. And, Vico says, "from this cord (for the lyre must have begun with the monochord) they fashioned the lyre of Orpheus, to the accompaniment of which, singing to them the force of the gods in the auspices, he tamed the beasts of Greece to humanity."[23] The lyre, then, the bringing together of several monochords into a single apparatus, appears when many families are brought together and enabled to co-exist harmoniously. The lyre is law.

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[21] Ibid., 262.

[22] Ibid., 180. The bracketed comments are mine, and are intended to elucidate the very specific meanings for the words "gentile," "cyclops," "divine," and "fides," as Vico established earlier in the 1744 edition of *The New Science*.

[23] Ibid., 180.

> [T]he lyre was the union of the cords or forces of the fathers, of which the public force was composed which is called civil power, which finally put an end to all private force and violence. Hence the law was defined with full propriety by the poets as *lyra regnorum*, 'the lyre of kingdoms,' in which were brought into accord the family kingdoms of the fathers which had hitherto been in disaccord because they were all isolated and divided from one another in the state of the families.[24]

So Orpheus, or *an* Orpheus, or *someone who is Orphic*, is someone who pronounces the law, who is capable of finessing music out of a collection of several taut strings, who is the founder and keeper of civil humanity because he enables so many families to live in harmony with each other.

Orpheus, then, becomes a character who can be conjured in a type of storytelling that serves the purpose of describing dynamics involving what we at present call the institution of *law*. If, for example, there is a popular uprising that results in the overturning of a government, one could say (to use the example Vico employs), "Orpheus [...] met his death at the hands of the Bacchantes [...], who broke his lyre to pieces," instead of "the old ruling class was usurped by the infuriated plebs, as the latter denied the precedence of the ancient rule of law over the will of the people." [25] Here, "Bacchantes" represents "the infuriated plebs," the "lyre" represents the ancient rule of law, and "Orpheus" represents the old ruling class.

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While Vico employs the mythology of Orpheus to introduce his idea of poetic wisdom, Homer receives a standalone—and much more thorough—treatment. Vico works to find historical truth within ancient mythology in order to complete a universal archetype for the dynamics of societies and governments at large, thereby generating a playbook for contemporary governmental administrators to use in their decision-making within actual civil institutions. He does this by using Homer as a sort of bridging concept between poetic and vulgar language, thus providing a key to unravelling misconceptions about the ancient world, and therefore about the inevitable course of all nations.

[24] Ibid., 227-228.

[25] Ibid., 248.

But these true histories of ancient civilizations that Vico sees encapsulated within pagan mythology can only be recovered if he can understand precisely in what way they have been corrupted before arriving in their modern forms. The moment at which this corruption occurs, for Vico, *is* the emergence of Homer. Homer, who for Vico is the earliest author in all of history, therefore communicates a corrupt form of the true history of the first peoples of the world, but nevertheless the *least* corrupt form of that history available, and one that allows the best available access to truth.[26] Understanding Homer, then, is crucial to understanding history that predates written texts accessible in the present.

More importantly, however, Homer, due to his coming at the precise moment where a shift occurs away from poetic logic toward the vulgar, literal, abstract type of language we know and use today, is himself a poetic character. Just as Orpheus is not a god in the sense of an immortal individual, Homer is not a human in the sense of a mortal individual. Just as Orpheus was the stand-in character archetype used to anthropomorphize what we now call law, Homer was a name given to any Greek person of the roughly 460-year Homeric era who took it upon themself to tell the national history. [27]

What Vico sees in Homer is a people discussing a true narrative of real events that could have otherwise been told in abstract, metaphysical terms as the interaction of individuals, families, genders, ages, communities, ethnicities, and other groupings of people in regard to matters of politics, law, commerce, agriculture, war, and more. However, these people don't discuss these narratives in such abstract metaphysical terms but rather, because abstract language was not yet available, in personified terms. They reflect these narratives through their immediate experiences. They relate as human stories of feeling, perception, love, hate, and conflict, and thereby contribute to a shared understanding of real but larger-than-human, metaphysical events in an immediately comprehensible way—as something *sens*ible. And yet this is not merely a story Vico tells about Homer. It is a story that he, just as Homer did, tells about himself in telling about Homer, and can only or would only tell about Homer in-and-through his own *self*-understanding. It is true about the past and the present at once. It describes Vico's own historical method as much as it describes Homer as an allegory for cultural history. It has relevance to the past and present at once. It is not history or rhetoric, past events or present politics, but both at once.

[26] Vico believes that Greek civilization predates Egyptian and Chinese, and so places Homer as the very first author in the world. See *The New Science*, 29-34.

[27] Ibid., 308.

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Due to the fundamental ephemerality of sound as a physical phenomenon, this simultaneity of past and present, history and rhetoric, self and other, as outlined by Vico, is not a quality we can *choose* to embed within our musical practices. It *is always and will always* be there, whether we aim to create something new or recreate something old. There is no utterance in music that is free from either subject or object. A musician cannot merely state a fact in their music without placing that fact in a judgmental form, nor can they merely pass judgment without embedding that judgment's referentiality to fact within it. A musician cannot merely display the notes on a page or the sound of an instrument in the way a critical theorist can merely quote the words of a document or hold up an artifact for anyone to see—at least not in music itself. Of course, even those acts a critical theorist can do in their empirical mode are not free from judgments either, as White, Stoler, and many others have pointed out. But we musicians cannot even get *that* close to neutrality, which is yet still so far away. Music is neither language nor object but *phenomenon* and *phantom*. In order to 'give the facts,' a musician must embody them, perform them, pass them through themself; must, to again repeat this quote from *The New Science*, "become them by transforming himself into them."[28] In which case, of course, are they still *facts*? Music is and always will be perception, memory, and imagination at once. Instead of trying to escape, avoid, excuse, or conceal this, I want to *practice* it.

The transcendence of subject-object dualism represented by Vico's poetic wisdom is not a mere balancing act between 'what I want' and 'what is true about the past.' Rather, such a distinction is simply not coherent. All that exists is the *I*, which sees, hears, feels, thinks, and communicates. Which is also not to say that it's only about 'what I want' either, because one's sense of self is only possible via experience of the outside world and interaction with others. The two are inextricable. The distinction is simply moot. "[O]ne makes [...] things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them."[29] In confronting something unfamiliar, one develops an understanding of it insofar as one recognizes oneself

[28] Ibid., 129-130.

[29] Ibid., 129-130.

in it, and in order to communicate about it, to represent it to others, one transfigures oneself into that specific subset of their own self-understanding such that the end result is not a cross section of the person themself, but a cross-section that can lend their peers a way of engaging with the unfamiliar thing in question.

The result of this, of course, is neither immutable nor universal. It is an incomplete representation of the unfamiliar thing that is only communicable to a subset of people who already have some understanding of the person communicating about it. This is ok. Its incompleteness is compensated for by the addition of other perspectives from other members of the community represented in this narrative. How could any one individual be expected to present a representation of something in its totality? And why should anyone be expected to communicate beyond the group of people they know? They can certainly be expected to expand their personal community and to deepen their understanding of that community, but what can be the rationale for advocating for a truly universal mode of communication other than a desire for the total domination of all humanity by a single subset thereof? A limit on the size of one's audience only nurtures further diversity among humanity as a whole. And any misunderstanding prompted by inability to communicate beyond one's actual peers should merely encourage one to re-evaluate the nuances of their own perspective in further detail.

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Where is the human of the historian-musician? They read, write, look, teach, practice, listen, rehearse, perform, discuss. They are in the archive. Archives that are of substantial interest to historians of 18th-century music are, broadly speaking, buildings that hold documents containing any combination of language, notation, and image. They can also be sites where instruments are collected. Architecture can be considered archival as well—spaces where music was once made can be observed similarly to documents describing the music once made in them. The human of the historian sits in the archive, holds an instrument, stands in a music room. As they practice, they encounter technical obstacles and hardships; they face decisions about ornamentation, harmony, timbre, and expression; they mimic and find themselves mimicking; they relish well-worn paths just as they push themselves to escape their

habits. And they exist in the world as humans beyond music. They think when they're not being paid to think; they listen when they're not being paid to listen. They carry their musicianship into their lives beyond music.

What are this subject's objects? With what physical matter do they engage? What sensory perception do they experience? What things external to them must be translated into a cross-section of their being to be understood? They are those archival documents, historical instruments, and buildings. Historical music—intentional artistic sound production of the past—is conspicuously absent. This subject can engage with everything except what they most explicitly desire to address. Historical music is more the topic of this research than its object. It is an abstraction. And though my mind may be capable of such abstraction in the way Vico's first peoples were not, it would be productive to nevertheless proceed here as if I were so incapable. Poetic wisdom comes from a place of radical groundedness that I must lower myself into if I'm to draw out the concept's potential value for the historian-musician. I must relinquish the idea of historical music as object and instead focus on those physical objects that can actually be accessed. I must imagine what might happen if a present-day historian were to suddenly lose their capacity for abstraction and intuit themselves into the quite different knowledge system of poetic wisdom.

So as I begin, within the archive, I look at a document and I see that my choice of what document to bring out and look at is informed by my own particular interests, aesthetic and artistic, and my own ideologies about music, politics, and culture. I pull out fragments and anonymi because I am drawn to the incomprehensible, to that which resists understanding, and to that which is contradictory or opaque, even absurd. Others' choices will be different, but no less personal unless they deceive themselves that that is the case. I cannot divorce myself from myself. My being is my guide. My experiences built my ear, my body, my desires, and the environments in which I now find myself. And so I find anonymi and fragments because the whole of my being has set out to look for them almost without my conscious choice to do so.

What then do I actually do once I've requested them to be brought up from the archival stacks; once I've decided what to find; once I've found it? How do I *be* with them? I want to understand what they are, certainly, and yet I can only understand them insofar as they appear already to be analogous to

myself, to my history in music, and to my tastes and propensities and my ability to make music in particular ways, with particular peers, in particular contexts, at particular times. I am only able to see in them what I am able to see in notation of any kind. I take those qualities of myself I see within them *and I become only them* for a moment. I become that version of myself which is readily there to be seen in the notation in front of me. And so something new emerges. If I've never looked at this particular document before; this subset of my individuality that I become in looking at it is one I've never performed before.

And then I speak, musically, as this new being. I make this notation into new notation to be used for the making of music by performers other than myself—my collaborators; performers—who consider feedback I generate by listening to rehearsals and communicate by speaking, gesturing, and imitating.

There's a crucial distinction here to be identified between this process and more Modern, authorship-oriented compositional practices. I have not simply taken these fragments and anonymi for *use* in my own compositions. That would require retaining my selfhood as a separate entity from the historical notation I use. I do not merely employ these fragments in a context separate from them. I do not drop them into a pre-formed musical style that is my own. I am not interested in a compare-and-contrast approach to understanding the new through the old and the old through the new. There is no passing back and forth between objectivity and subjectivity, empiricism and rhetoric, fact and opinion—no mode switching as in critical theory.

I *lose myself* in them. My selfhood as an independent identity dissolves into whatever identity the notation I embody might be seen to have, were each individual's interaction with it strung together into some sort of composite picture of it from a thousand different angles. *We*, together, the notation and I, become something in union. I speak from my own body, with my own turns of phrase, my own inflection and cadence, and yet none of the words I use are of my own language. As any individual person in Vico's Greece might *become* Homer, might *transform* themself into Homer as they begin to speak their cultural history, my compositional pen begins to write as the notation it has seen. I as a composer transform myself into the document in front of me, its turns of phrase, its mannerisms, its vocabulary and witticisms, but not in an authentic way, not in a full way, not in an objective way, not in a way in which I become *detached* from myself in order to become an other. I melt into the other. My selfhood fuses with it. A listener to the music I make in this manner becomes unable to hear me except by listening

to the fragments I have used. Yet they cannot hear these fragments themselves except through, or perhaps *as*, me.