

# The Socio-Political View about the Primitive World in Giambattista Vico's Thought

## La visión socio-política sobre el mundo primitivo en el pensamiento de Giambattista Vico

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### Abstract

This essay emphasizes how Vico was one of the modern philosophers to set himself the goal to reconstruct the history of the primitive world. Differently from several authors who preceded him and also other contemporary thinkers, the Neapolitan philosopher showed that the world of the origin wasn't idyllic, but it was affected by fear, anguish and basic needs. What mainly characterizes Vico, however, is the fact that he represented the primitive world not as a unitary and fixed block, but as a world made of different historical phases and of class and social conflicts. As there were no written documents, Vico elaborated a reconstruction of history, basing it on a new and revolutionary theory of myths which, being based on creativity induced by fantasy, are called "universali fantastici" (fantastic universals).

**Key-words:** Primitive world, Society, Politics, Myth, Needs.

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## Resumen

El presente ensayo pone de relieve cómo Vico fue uno de los pensadores modernos que se planteó el objetivo de reconstruir la historia del mundo primitivo. A diferencia de varios autores que le precedieron y de otros contemporáneos, el filósofo napolitano mostró que el mundo originario, en lugar de idílico, se hallaba afligido por el miedo, la angustia y las necesidades básicas. Sin embargo, lo que ante todo define a Vico es el hecho de representar el mundo primitivo no como un bloque fijo y unitario, sino como un mundo constituido en diferentes fases históricas y por conflictos sociales y de clase. Al carecer de documentos escritos, Vico elaboró una reconstrucción de la historia basada en una nueva y revolucionaria teoría de mitos que, al fundarse en la creatividad inducida por la fantasía, son denominados “universalisti fantastici” (universales fantásticos).

**Palabras-clave:** Mundo primitivo, Sociedad, Política, Mito, Necesidades.

## 1. The mythographic literature of the Renaissance

One of the aspects that principally characterize Giambattista Vico's philosophy is his gnoseological theory about myths. Vico was strongly bound to humanistic culture and most of his stances were caused by his cultural background imbued with humanistic and Renaissance values<sup>2</sup>. However, relatively to the interpretation of myths, which in Vico's times were called “fables”, the Neapolitan thinker decidedly diverges from the vision that was predominant in the periods of Humanism and of the Renaissance.

The work, which can be considered the very first treaty on mythology of the Renaissance, that is to say *Genealogia deorum gentilium* (1365) by Giovanni Boccaccio, fixed, in a sense, the features of the interpretation of myths, which would be valid at least until the end of XVII century. Boccaccio insisted a lot on the defense of poetry from the accusation of uselessness, proposing, instead, the thesis according to which under the poetical surface there were very meaningful concepts. Boccaccio believed in the complete autonomy of poetical fables both from Rhetoric and Philosophy, besides he counted on the fables on gods in order to manifest a “physical theology”, in whose context the forces of universal and human nature were produced. Boccaccio said:

<sup>2</sup> Many authoritative scholars insist on the link between Vico and humanistic culture; among them we can mention E. Grassi, *Vico e l'Umanesimo*, Milano, Guerini, 1992; K.O. Apel, *L'idea di lingua nella tradizione dell'umanesimo da Dante a Vico*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1975; M. Fubini, *Stile e umanità di Giambattista Vico*, Milano-Napoli, Ricciardi, 1965.

Di esse teologie, infatti, la fisica si attribuisce ai poeti famosi perché, sotto le loro finzioni, essi coprono le cose naturali e morali e le azioni degli uomini illustri e talvolta quelle che sembrano riguardare i loro dèi; e specialmente perché per la prima volta i poeti composero carmi sacri in lode degli dèi e nascosero le loro imprese sotto la corteccia poetica (...) e da ciò furono detti teologi dell'antico mondo pagano<sup>3</sup>.

Boccaccio's language seems, in a sense, to introduce Vico, especially when he emphasizes the presence of poets-theologians of the world of the origins. Different is, anyway, the fundamental concept that supports Vico's theory, in which it is above all the idea that a deep and rational truth is brought forward<sup>4</sup>. Despite all this, it is necessary to clarify that the attempt to spot Vico's reference points is neither easy nor bound to reach favourable results, above all because of the lack of a serious documentation; besides, there is also the difficulty to penetrate into Vico's language, often obscure and involved. What is certain is that the Neapolitan thinker meant to subvert the theory about the myth that had been prevailing since the Renaissance, affirming a revolutionary interpretation, forerunner of socio-anthropological theories.

As regards myths, Vico used a series of reference texts of various nature, not necessarily linked to a mythological treatment. Undoubtedly, as emphasized by Romana Bassi, he mainly studied documents like *Natalis Comitum Mythologiae libri decem* (1568) by Natale Conti, *De deis gentium varia et multiplex historia* (1548) by Lilio Gregorio Giraldi, *Le imagini con la spositione de i dèi de li antichi* (1556) by Vincenzo Cartari, and last but not least, *Metamorphoses* by Ovid. This last book offered him a deep knowledge of the narrative type, especially as regards some particular fables. Vico had the opportunity to read not only the Latin original work, but also the various translations supplied with comments and notes which were very useful to the

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<sup>3</sup> G. Boccaccio, *Genealogia deorum gentium* (1365), in Id., *Tutte le opere*, edited by V. Branca, voll. VII-VIII, Milano, Mondadori, 1998, vol. VII, p. 1547. (Translation: "Of these theologies, in fact, Physics is attributed to famous poets, because, in their own creations, they hide natural and moral things, actions made by illustrious men and, sometimes, the actions regarding their gods; and especially because for the first time poets composed sacred poems in praise of gods and hid their needs under the poetical surface [...] and for this reason they were defined as the theologians of the ancient pagan world").

<sup>4</sup> According to Alberto Asor Rosa, Vico "aveva senz'altro un'ottima conoscenza delle *Genealogie* (...) che leggeva probabilmente nella traduzione italiana del Betussi, la quale ebbe una fortuna enorme". A. Asor Rosa, *La fondazione del laico*, in A. Asor Rosa (edited by), *Letteratura italiana*, vol. V, Torino, Einaudi, 1986, p. 122. (Translation: Vico "surely had a very good knowledge of *Genealogie* [...], which he probably used to read in the Italian translation by Betussi and which had an enormous fortune"). The same passage is reported in R. Bassi, *Canoni di mitologia. Materiali per lo studio delle fonti vichiane*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2005, p. 43. On the other hand, we can certainly affirm that Vico considered Boccaccio's work as an important source, as we get to know from his explicit quotations, both in the edition of 1730 and in the one of 1744 of his masterpiece, *Scienza nuova*.

different interpretations of fables<sup>5</sup>. Anyway, Vico's reflections on the texts by his "quarto autore" (fourth author), Francis Bacon, are remarkable. Vico may have found particular stimuli from *De sapientia veterum* (1609), in which the mythical allegories hid cosmogonic theories and physical laws, as well as references to a materialistic naturalism and allusions to the distinction between science and faith. Even though Bacon's conclusions ended up by joining the humanistic-Renaissance origin that considered myths as the epitomes of deep knowledge, Vico surely saw in the British philosopher's theories an attempt to problematize ancient fables, as we can understand from the passage in which Bacon affirmed as follows: "Neque me latet quam versatilis material huc illuc trahi, imo et duci possit; quantumque ingenii commoditas et discursus valeat, ut quae numquam cogitate sint, belle tamen attribuantur"<sup>6</sup>.

Vico also refused the pedagogic connotation that Bacon attributed to myths, but he was very close to the English philosopher's positions when Bacon stated that myths, with their own wealth of similes, could better penetrate rough minds like the ones of primitive men<sup>7</sup>. In conclusion, in the Baconian theories, Vico accepted the thesis that the meaning of myths is original, but Vico refused the variety of interpretations typical of Bacon's theory, which were sometimes conflicting and which Bacon developed diffusely<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> R. Bassi, *Canoni di mitologia*, cit., pp. 68-70.

<sup>6</sup> F. Bacon, *De sapientia veterum* (1609), in Id., *Opera omnia*, Lipsiae, Impensis Johannis Justi Erythropili, excudebat Christianus Goetius, 1694, p. 1248. (Translation: "Very clear is the fact for me that the fable can be versatile, as it can be both understood and judged in different ways and, according to the case and the pleasure, it can be given new meanings").

<sup>7</sup> Bacon, in fact, affirmed: "Itaque antiquis Saeculis, cum rationis humanae inventa, et conclusiones etiam ea, quae nunc tritae et vulgatae sunt, tunc temporis novae et consuetae essent, omnia Fabularum omnigenum, et Aenigmatum et Parabolorum, et Similitudinum plena erant: atque per haec docendi ratio, non occultandi artificium quaesitum est; rudibus scilicet tunc temporis hominum ingeniis, et fere incapacibus. Nam ut Hieroglyphica literis, ita Parabolae Argumentis antiquiores erant. Atque etiam nunc, si quis novam in aliquibus lucem humanis mentibus affundere velit, idque non incommode et aspere, prorsus eadem via insistendum est, et ad similitudinem auxilia confugiendum". Ivi, p. 1249. (Translation: "Therefore, in ancient centuries, when the discoveries and the conclusions of human reason, also the ones that were commonplace and known, in those times were new and unusual, everything was full of fables and enigmas of every kind, of parables, of similes. By means of these things they tried the way to teach, not the device to hide, as in those times human minds were rough and intolerant, so to speak unable of subtlety but the one of subject to the senses. In fact, as Hieroglyphs are more ancient than letters, in the same way parables are more ancient than reasoning. Still today, if one wants to diffuse a new light in some human minds without any obstacles and difficulties, it is necessary to beat the same way and to look for help in similes").

<sup>8</sup> For a wider treatment of this topic, the following texts are recommended: Pa. Rossi, *Francesco Bacone. Dalla magia alla scienza*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2004, pp. 201-285; E. De Mas, *Francesco Bacone e il De sapientia veterum*, Milano, Giuffrè, 1957; Id., *La storia del genere umano secondo Francesco Bacone e Giambattista Vico*, Napoli, Jovene, 1958.

## 2. The revolutionary concept of the myth by Giambattista Vico

### 2.1. The “fantastic universals” and the myths elaborated because of fear

We can notice a certain regularity in Vico's interest in myths only from 1720, when the Neapolitan thinker wrote *De Uno universi iuris principio et fine uno*. However, it was only with *Scienza nuova* that the mythological material found a definitive arrangement: in particular, in the first version of 1725, myths were defined as “caratteri poetici” (poetical characters) of the primitive world, which had their counterparts in the letters of the alphabet in our vocabulary<sup>9</sup>; following this idea, Vico had the project to write a “Dizionario Mentale Comune dell’Umanità” (Common Mental Dictionary of Mankind) and a “Common Mental Dictionary” relative to every language.

In the two following versions of his masterpiece – the first in 1730, the second in 1744 – Vico made some fundamental modifications and connected the expression of “caratteri poetici” to the one of “universali fantastici” (fantastic universals), which is as much meaningful, by which Vico stated that thought did not start by elaborating references to real people (in the version of 1725 the thinker presented some elements coming from Euhemerism that disappeared in the successive versions) that, with the passing of time, in the collective imagination, assumed a divine role, but thought started as directly fantastic, being formed by an interaction of memory, fantasy, wit which in primitive times were a unique and single creative and poetical faculty<sup>10</sup>.

The myths, called “universali fantastici” (fantastic universals), became a complex gnoseological instrument by which the thought of primitive men, which was originated at once, was emphasized in a continuous flow of

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<sup>9</sup> Vico asserts that “dopo venticinque anni ormai che corrono di una continua ed aspra meditazione, si è ritrovato finalmente ciò che tal primo principio è di questa Scienza, quale l’abici è il principio della grammatica, quali le forme geometriche sono il principio della geometria”. G.B. Vico, *Principi di una Scienza nuova intorno alla natura delle nazioni per la quale si ritrovano i principi di altro sistema del diritto naturale delle genti* (1725), in Id., *Opere*, edited by A. Battistini, Milano, Mondadori, 2007, p. 1107; cpv. 261.

<sup>10</sup> Among the scholars, there are some who, despite all this, go on thinking that in Vico some traces of Euhemerism can always be found. David Bidney, for example, affirms that “Vico’s method of interpreting myths may be termed ‘ethnic Euhemerism’, for he reduced the classic Greek and Roman gods and heroes to class symbols of the societies they represented at given periods of history”. D. Bidney, *Vico’s New Science of Myth* [in G. Tagliacozzo – H. White, coord.: *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969], pp. 259-277; particularly, p. 269. Among those who have strongly been against the thesis maintained by Bidney there is Donald Philip Verene, according to whom “Vico’s theory of the myth does not derive from Euhemerism, not even from a type of modified or new Euhemerism, as some of his commentators stated. Despite the fact that Euhemerism was at Vico’s times a diffused conviction and although the philosopher often expressed the opinion that fables ‘were the first stories of pagan nations’, interpreting his concept of the myth as Euhemeristic corresponds to ignoring what Vico means as a fable”. D.P. Verene, *Vico la scienza della fantasia*, Roma, Armando, 1984, p. 72. As regards this theory, it is also advised to compare Benedetto Croce’s position who dissociated himself from an Euhemeristic vision of Vico.

sensations, emotions and particular needs that rose to collective and universal dimensions<sup>11</sup>.

So the “universali fantastici” represented the primitive world’s thoughts, language and needs, also pointing out the evolution of human progress. In conclusion, it is reasonable to say that Vico revolutionized the way to understand myths, because he gave them a socio-political interpretation, so clearly diverging both from the followers of the concepts typical of the Renaissance who, as we have already seen, interpreted myths as a form of knowledge, and those who, instead, considered myths as lies or cheats.

After dividing history into three fundamental phases (the age of gods, the age of heroes and the age of men) Vico established that the needs of the first period were the classical myths of the Roman-Greek Olympus, “le dodici divinità delle genti maggiori” (the twelve gods of major peoples), that is to say Jove, Juno, Diana, Apollo, Saturn, Vulcan, Vesta (or Cibele or Berecinzia), Mars, Venus, Minerva, Mercury, Neptune.

Particularly complex is the interpretation relative to the creation of the first *fantastic universal*, Jove that, according to Vico, was elaborated by the minds of primitive men as a consequence of impressive natural phenomena, like a very strong lightning or a terrible thunder. Vico, in fact, affirmed “La natura loro era, in tale stato, d’uomini tutti robuste forze di corpo, che, urlando, brontolando, spiegavano le loro violentissime passioni; si finsero il cielo esser un gran corpo animato, che per tal aspetto chiamarono Giove”<sup>12</sup>, underlining the state of mind in which the first men found themselves at the moment they were shaken by the violence of natural phenomena. As the history of the primitive world, that is to say pre-history, lacked documents, Vico chose an operative procedure that was completely new for his times: the identification capacity, based on imagination; in other words, he applied “pretence”<sup>13</sup>, to try to understand how the passage from the ferine world to the first forms of civilizations had taken place, and in order to do this he invented a natural jerk, also trying to imagine how primitive men may have reacted. The identification capacity made Vico suppose that the first lightning and thunder produced a state of anguish and inability in the first men’s psyche<sup>14</sup>, who might have suffered from a kind of paralysis, if an innate and, in a sense, encouraging mechanism had not taken place: the ability to

<sup>11</sup> As Jürgen Trabant rightly observes, “Vico’s true discovery is the one of a primordial *poiesis*, of the creation of original poetical signs, of a fantastic primitive semiosis”. J. Trabant, *La scienza nuova dei segni antichi. La sematologia di Vico*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1996, p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> G.B. Vico, *Principi di Scienza d’intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni* (1744) (from now on I will indicate this work with SN 44), in Id., *Opere*, edited by A. Battistini, cit., p. 571; cpv. 377.

<sup>13</sup> Relatively to this aspect, it is advised to read G.A. Gualtieri, *Giambattista Vico: dalla metafisica della natura alla “Scienza dell’umanità”* [in D. Felice, coord.: *Studi di Storia della Filosofia*. Sibi suis amicisque, Bologna, Clueb, 2013], pp. 217-253; particularly, pp. 234-235; Id., *Giambattista Vico. La retorica come scienza e l’alternativa alla gnoseologia moderna*, Lavis, La Finestra Editrice, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> About the role of emotions in Vico, read, among recent books Gf. Zanetti, *Vico eversivo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2011, pp. 51-85.

transform the frightening natural forces into a supernatural entity, severe but with human and familiar aspects<sup>15</sup>. The fear to be observed by that supernatural entity called Giove (Jove), triggers a “conative” force, a kind of perfecting movement that, despite not being conscious, produced a first form of human civilization:

Finalmente fulminò il cielo, e Giove diede principio al mondo degli uomini dal poner questi in conato, ch'è propio della libertà della mente, siccome dal moto, il qual è propio de' corpi, che son agenti necessari, cominciò il mondo della natura; perocché que', che ne' corpi sembran conati, sono moti insensibili, come si è detto sopra nel *Metodo*. Da tal conato uscì la luce civile, di cui è carattere Apollo, alla cui luce si distinse la civile bellezza onde furono belli gli eroi<sup>16</sup>.

From that moment on, men felt the need to please Jove, perceived as a universal father, who punished his own children at their first mistake. The deriving self-preservation process led those men, who had been living till then like beasts and in an isolated and individual lifestyle, to get together in order to face the danger that dominated from above. Socialization, in Vico's opinion, was not born as the consequence of a natural and rational tendency to live together, as Locke affirmed; this did not happen after a conscious and meditated calculation either, as Hobbes wanted, but it was due to an instinct that made primitive men sense the necessity to abandon the beastly and lonely phase, to privilege a community life, in order to ease the sensations of danger<sup>17</sup>.

The initial impotency turns into a creative impulse that was at the basis of Jove's formation. Indicative is the fact that Vico, instead of supposing results of a satanic kind, as it would be logical being such entities produced by fear and anguish, imagined results that were beneficial and positive to men and this community. This way the Neapolitan philosopher focused his attention on the social importance assumed by religion as regards the realization of human civilization. In fact, although Vico made a distinction between the

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<sup>15</sup> About this topic, it is advised to read G.A. Gualtieri, *Conoscenza e sviluppo del mondo umano nella filosofia di Giambattista Vico*, “Dianoia”, 24, 2017, pp. 73-96; particularly pp. 80-81; Id., *La creazione delle «dodici divinità delle genti maggiori» nella Scienza nuova di Giambattista Vico come espressione delle passioni umane: paura, bisogni, conflitti*, “Bibliomanie”, n° 42, July/December 2016, [www.bibliomanie.it/vico\\_scienza\\_nuova\\_gualtieri.htm](http://www.bibliomanie.it/vico_scienza_nuova_gualtieri.htm), without pagination, consulted on 3 June 2017.

<sup>16</sup> G.B. Vico, *SN* 44, cit., p. 762; cpv. 689.

<sup>17</sup> In this perspective, we can say that Vico foreran the most recent studies regarding the differences between solitary life and associated life, as it is possible to understand through Anna Oliverio Ferraris's consideration, who states that “la persona singola può infatti mettere in atto svariate strategie per far fronte ai pericoli e alle angosce, ma raramente ha successo se è completamente sola”. A. Oliverio Ferraris, *Psicologia della paura*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1980, p. 14. (Translation: “the single person can put into practice various strategies to cope with dangers and anguish, but this single person is rarely successful if she/he is completely alone”).

“true religion”, Christianity, and the idolatrous and pagan religion of the ancient world, it is possible to sense, in the pages of his masterpiece, a good consideration of religion in general. Once imagined Jove’s existence, in fact, men organized at first in family groups and successively in larger collective structures. In all this, Vico supposed that Providence was always effective, as it accompanied men’s progress and civilization, as it can be deduced from this passage:

La provvidenza fu l’ordinatrice del diritto natural delle genti, la qual permise che, poich  per lunga scorsa di secoli le nazioni avevano a vivere incapaci del vero e dell’equit  naturale [...], esse si attenessero al certo ed all’equit  civile, che scrupolosamente custodisce le parole degli ordini e delle leggi, e da queste fossero portate ad osservarle generalmente anco ne’ casi che riuscissero dure, perch  si serbassero le nazioni<sup>18</sup>.

The terror was such that its effects were felt also after the moment of initial shock had faded. Before the triggering of the first lightning and the first thunder, men wandered through the wood and copulated like beasts. When they imagined Jove watching and disapproving of their obscene behavior, the primitives were taken by a kind of moral fear, fruit of the “semi di vero” (seeds of truth) put into their souls by God, and so they decided to adopt new rules of life. The first of these rules was linked to the necessity to choose the women who to have children with and to form the first family nuclei with. The selection of women led inevitably, in Vico’s view, to the celebration of the first marriages, “carnali congiugnimenti pudichi fatti col timore di qualche divinit ”<sup>19</sup>, to represent which there is Juno, “detta ‘giogale’ da quel giogo ond’ il matrimonio solenne fu detto ‘coniugium’, e ‘coniuges’ il marito e la moglie”<sup>20</sup>. So, the state of fear also influenced the creation of strong human bonds and marked a distinction between those who realized all this and began a process of civilization, and those who, being uninterested in the event, went on living indifferent and undisturbed in their own ferine state.

Following Jean Bodin’s theory<sup>21</sup>, Vico made the hypothesis that the family was the fundamental structure of civil society, whose head was the *paterfamilias*. The Neapolitan philosopher theorized that the family was the original political group, emphasizing the political nature of the primitive family law and its connection with religion. In this sense, it was not the blood tie to be

<sup>18</sup> G.B. Vico, *SN* 44, cit., p. 540; cpv. 328.

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, p. 645; cpv. 505. Translation: “carnal and decorous unions made because of the fear towards some gods”.

<sup>20</sup> Ivi, p. 648; cpv. 513. Translation: “defined as ‘giogale’, the yoke from which marriage was called ‘coniugium’, and ‘coniuges’, who are husband and wife”.

<sup>21</sup> H.J. Bodini, *Methodus, ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (1566), in *Œuvres philosophiques de Jean Bodin*, edited by P. Mesnard, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1951, pp. 190-191.

so important as the eminently political one, which was established between the *paterfamilias* and the other members of the family group, that is to say the wife, the children and the *famuli*.

The successive passage is represented by the choice of those places propitious to the development of family and community life. In order to try to understand where the first social settlements may have taken place, Vico made use of the interaction between mythology and etymological procedures; for this reason he affirmed that:

Gli uomini semplici e rozzi, seguendo l'aquile, le quali credevano esser uccelli di Giove perché volan alto nel cielo, ritruovarono le fontane perenni, e ne venerarono quest'altro gran beneficio che fece loro il Cielo quando regnava in terra (...). Però, sopra tutt'altro, per le fontane perenni fu detto da' politici che la comunanza dell'acqua fusse stata l'occasione che da presso vi si unissero le famiglie, e che quindi le prime comunanze si dicessero φρατρία da' greci, siccome le prime terre vennero dette 'paci' a' latini, come da' greci dori fu la fonte chiamata πηγῆ: ch'è l'acqua, prima delle due principali solennità delle nozze<sup>22</sup>.

So Vico, maintained that water springs were the places near which the first communities settled down and that the goddess embodying such a process was Diana, whose myth narrated the story that saw her as the protagonist together with Atteone, the hunter that had dared look at her while she was bathing naked. For this reason Atteone was transformed into a deer and mauled by his dogs<sup>23</sup>. Although the panic fear that had produced Jove and Juno seemed to diminish with the formation of the "fantastic universal" of Diana, it did not disappear completely, as, in fact " 'lymphati' (propriamente 'spruzzati d'acqua pura', che tanto vuol dire 'lympa') dovettero dapprima intendersi cotali Atteoni impazzati di superstizioso spavento"<sup>24</sup>. The term "spavento", that is to say "fright", was also present during the birth of the principle of the burial; in fact, primitive men "sparsero i sepolcri di tanta religione, o sia divino spavento, che 'religiosa loca', per eccellenza restaron detti a' latini i luoghi ove fussero de' sepolcri"<sup>25</sup>. The formation of the third principle of humanity, the burial, according to Vico, did not occur on the basis of the respect towards the dead<sup>26</sup>, but because of a utilitarian reason: the stink provoked by the decomposition of corpses. The burial, anyway, represented a phenomenon that, in Vico's

<sup>22</sup> G.B. Vico, *SN* 44, cit., pp. 659-660; cpv. 525-526.

<sup>23</sup> About the different myths, with particular reference to Diana, in the context of Vico's works, it could be useful to read R. Bassi, *Favole vere e severe. Sulla fondazione antropologica del mito nell'opera vichiana*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2004, pp. 61-115.

<sup>24</sup> G.B. Vico, *SN* 44, cit., pp. 661-662; cpv. 528.

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, p. 662; cpv. 529.

<sup>26</sup> About the birth of the feeling of respect to the dead in pre-history, it is advisable to read L. Mumford, *La città nella storia*, Milano, Bompiani, 1977, p. 17.

opinion, triggered both religious and juridical implications. In fact, Vico did not attribute such a principle to a precise divinity, but to two of them, that is to say to Diana and Apollo, the former being expression of the “frightful” sacredness of burials, the latter, considered as the “founder of mankind”, embodying the legal repercussions linked to the formation of the first family and private tombs, introduced by the phenomenon of burials<sup>27</sup>.

## 2.2. The myths elaborated due to material needs: The increase in the complexity of social relationships

From this moment on there was a change in the current feeling of the community: no more fear, but the alternation of material needs would be at the centre of human problems. In fact, once the main principles of religion, marriages and burials were defined, once blood and law ties were established together with the first forms of settlement, then the fundamental ways of livelihood would be, above all, the principal interests of primitive men.

The solution was represented, first of all, by the deforestation of woods and the cultivation of fields, which the birth of agriculture derived from

Ma – stando essi eroi Fermi dentro circoscritte terre, ed essendo cresciute in numero le lor famiglie, né bastando loro i frutti spontanei della natura, e temendo per averne copia d’uscire da’ confini che si avevano essi medesimi circoscritti per quelle catene della religione ond’i giganti erano incatenati per sotto i monti, ed avendo la medesima religione insinuato loro di dar fuoco alle selve per aver il prospetto del cielo, onde venissero loro gli auspici – si diedero con molta, lunga dura fatica a ridurre le terre a coltura e seminarvi il frumento, il quale, brustolito fra gli dumenti e spinai, avevano forse osservato utile per lo nutrimento umano<sup>28</sup>.

The phases regarding the succession of these events were represented by three divinities: Vulcan, Saturn and Vesta (or Cibeles or Berecinzia) who bore witness to the birth of the first true revolution in history, that is to say agriculture, which problematized social relationships, also due to population increase. Vico understood that the agricultural production brought about numerous changes in human communities as cultivated fields, being permanent sources of food, favoured a more and more increased number of stable societies. Vico emphasized a certain mastery of sketching out the

<sup>27</sup> About the complex matter regarding Vico’s interpretation of burials, it could be important to read G.A. Gualtieri, *Giambattista Vico: dalla metafisica della natura alla “Scienza dell’umanità”*, cit., pp. 236-239; Id., *Giambattista Vico. La retorica come scienza e l’alternativa alla gnoseologia moderna*, cit. R. Bassi, *Favole vere e severe*, cit., p. 166, tends, instead, to attribute burials only to Diana.

<sup>28</sup> G.B. Vico, *SN 44*, cit., pp. 667-668; cpv. 539.

differences that marked the passage from an economy based on simple hunting and harvesting to an agricultural one, pointing out the changes that had taken place inside the community and in the context of personal relationships, made possible by the new forms of production.

The growth of complexity of social factors is underlined by the Neapolitan philosopher through the “*empi deboli*” (weak wicked) – that is to say those individuals who were not influenced by the rules that followed the birth of “fantastic universals” and, for this reason, still living in a pre-social state – who had escaped the ferociousness of the “*empi violenti*” (violent wicked), and had been welcomed by “*padri*” (fathers), in other words the householders who, in exchange for protection, reduced them to slavery<sup>29</sup>. The “*famoli*”, that is to say the slaves, were destined to the hardest jobs and their raise to the scene of history was linked to the increase in the complexity of social relationships, as a consequence of the birth of an agricultural economy. Vico seemed to make out another matter, too: the one relative to the choice made by a group of men to lose their freedom in exchange for a major social safety and protection inside a well defined community. In this way, the Neapolitan philosopher emphasized how the stable existence of a village or of a community was preferable to less compact forms of associations among small nomadic groups, as it offered conditions which were more favourable to feeding and protection.

Once reached a certain economic and social stability, communities felt the need to cope with other problems that appeared little by little; one of them was the necessity to defend themselves from external enemies and to fight in order to preserve their own culture, customs and religion:

Combatterono ‘*pro aris et focis*’ (...); combattere per la propria religione, a cui ricorre il genere umano ne’ disperati soccorsi della natura; onde le guerre di religione sono sanguinosissime, e gli uomini libertini, invecchiando, perché si sentono mancare i soccorsi della natura, divengon religiosi; onde noi sopra prendemmo la religione per primo principio di questa Scienza<sup>30</sup>.

Such a condition was documented by the “fantastic universal” of Mars, in whose name the “*heroes*” also fought to preserve their fields with loving care.

The protection of families and properties increased the sense of belonging to a social superior class, the nobility, with the consequent decision to form a precise ethical code, in order to underline the distinction from the “*famoli*”, that

<sup>29</sup> According to Riccardo Caporali, “[c]ontro la labile motilità del bestiale, la virtù dei padri si condensa nella ‘fissità’: nell’aggregazione, nella conservazione, nella tutela del ‘certo’ e del ‘chiuso’, a vincere l’isolamento e la dispersione dell’incerto, dell’aperto”. R. Caporali, *La tenerezza e la barbarie. Studi su Vico*, Napoli, Liguori, 2006, p. 101. By the same author, read *Heroes gentium. Sapienza e politica in Vico*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1992.

<sup>30</sup> G.B. Vico, *SN 44*, cit., p. 684; cpv. 562.

is to say the poor; all this was pointed out by the figure of Venus, the goddess of “bellezza civile” (civilized beauty). By this expression Vico emphasized the beauty of civilization compared to the savage barbarism that characterized both those who still lived in a nomadic state and the “famoli” that, despite the fact of being part of the various families, were not considered as “heroes” or nobles. So the “fantastic universal” of Venus, could be read in an opposite way as the goddess, according to Vico’s interpretation, expressed the awareness of the nobles’ superiority in comparison to the “famoli”, who the nobles exerted every form of power on. In this sense, such a myth was the expression of the first true class distinction inside society. So Venus, was not meant by Vico as the goddess of absolute or physical beauty, as tradition and Ficino’s neoplatonic concept wanted her to be, but she was the goddess representing a type of beauty which was relative to a particular historical moment and, in addition to this, a kind of beauty which was synonymous of social superiority.

### **2.3. “Politica poetica”: The birth of the myths that expressed the first class conflicts**

At the same time, with the development of these novelties there was also the birth of the first feeling of retaliation (revenge) by the “famoli”. The evidence of such a situation was offered by the different interpretation that the subject gave of some “fantastic universals”: Vulcan was the one “che fende il capo a Giove con un colpo di scure, onde nasce Minerva e, volendosi frapporre in una contesa tra Giove e Giunone, con un calcio da Giove è precipitato dal cielo e restonne zoppo”<sup>31</sup>; Mars “a cui Giove, in una forte riprensione che gli fa appo Omero, dice essere lo più vile di tutti gli dèi, e Minerva (...), il ferisce con un colpo di sasso (che devon essere stati i plebei che servivano gli eroi nelle guerre”<sup>32</sup>, and the some Venus “che deon essere state le mogli naturali di sì fatti plebei), che, con questo Marte plebeo, sono colti entrambi nella rete di Vulcano eroico e, scoperti ignudi dal Sole, sono presi a scherno dagli altri dèi”<sup>33</sup>.

Vico made the complexity of this historical moment emerge thanks to the introduction of “caratteri doppi” (double characters), those myths that were interpreted differently from the “heroes” and the “famoli”, according to various social conventions. All this was the prelude to the true change that would take place in the phase called “Politica poetica” (Poetical policy), in which there was a sort of rebellion by the “famoli”, who, “dovendo sempre vivere in tale stato servile, a capo di lunga età naturalmente se ne dovettero attediare”<sup>34</sup>, so originating the first conflicts with the “heroes”. The primitives bore fitness to

<sup>31</sup> Ivi, p. 693; cpv. 579.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> Ivi, p. 696; cpv. 583.

this period by elaborating the “fantastic universal” of Minerva, “la decima divinità delle genti dette maggiori”, whom “i famoli si finsero nascere con questa fantasia, fiera e ugualmente goffa: che Vulcano con una scure fendette il capo di Giove, onde nacque Minerva”<sup>35</sup>. Vico lets us deduce, then, that the legend according to which Minerva was born from Jove’s head was the fruit of the interpretation given by the only “heroes” in order to hide the development of the struggle being fought against the “famoli” and the dramatic events that were its consequence:

Volendo essi (i famoli) dire che la moltitudine de’ famoli ch’esercitava arti servili, che (...) venivano sotto il genere poetico di Vulcano plebeo, essi ruppero (...) il regno di Giove (come restò a’ latini “*minuere caput*” per “fiaccare la testa”, perché, non sappiendo dir in astratto “regno”, in concreto dissero “capo”), che stato era, nello stato delle famiglie, monarchico, e cangiarono in aristocratico in quello delle città<sup>36</sup>.

The upsetting caused by the famoli’s claims reverberated throughout the territory and provoked the passage from a family structure, which was substantially represented by a village community, to a more complex structure, which had the identity of a town community. The struggles that resulted from this situation, despite not overturning the previous territorial arrangement, had the effect to oblige the nobles to take the “famoli” into a certain consideration, not by trying to command respect forcibly, but by trying to convince them to fall back into line by using a gentle attitude and prudent donations. Vico described these historical events also making references to the tactical choices applied by the “heroes”, as

Color che servissero, gli eroi furono da un senso comune d’utilità costretti di far contenta la moltitudine de’ sollevati. Così si composero le prime città di soli nobili, che vi comandavano. Ma però, bisognandovi che vi fossero anche clienti, e mandarono le loro prime ambasciarie, che per diritto delle genti si mandavano da’ sovrani<sup>37</sup>.

This mediation brought about the “prima legge agraria che nacque al mondo, con la quale, da forti, rilasciarono a’ clienti il men che potevano, che fu il dominio bonitario de’ campi ch’arebbono assegnato loro gli eroi”<sup>38</sup>; just because it was the fruit of deceitful donations, this first agrarian law did not eliminate at all the precarious conditions in which the “famoli” lived, as the possession of the lands they had received could last “fintanto ch’agli eroi fusse

<sup>35</sup> Ivi, p. 701; cpv. 589.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> Ivi, p. 707; cpv. 597.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

piaciuto di mantenergli nel possesso de' campi ch'avevano loro assegnati"<sup>39</sup> and this produced a transformation of the "famoli" into the poor, trasformation by which Vico, almost anticipating Marx, implied the acquisition of a kind of "class consciousness" that would lead to struggles and claims, more diffused and dramatic than the previous ones.

By the interaction between his knowledge of Roman history and his hypotheses about the primitive world, Vico reconstructed the moment when the first feuds were formed, which were personified by the figure of "Erocle gallico"<sup>40</sup>. The complexity of these events was such that, according to the Neapolitan thinker, three kinds of feuds could be distinguished:

Il primo fu il dominio bonitario de' feudi rustici ovvero umani (...). Il secondo fu dominio quiritario di feudi nobili, o sia eroici, ovvero armati, oggi detti "militari" (...). Il terzo, con tutta la propietà detto "dominio civile", che esse città eroiche, compostesi sul principio di soli eroi, avevano de' fondi, per certi feudi divini ch'essi padri di famiglia avevano innanzi ricevuto da essa divinità provvedente<sup>41</sup>.

With the formation of feuds there was a sort of restoration of the social order, borne witness to the myth of Mercury, the eleventh divinity, whose iconographic attribute, the caduceus, was interpreted by Vico as "la verga con cui Mercurio richiama l'anime dall'Orco (...) richiama a vita socievole i clienti, che, usciti dalla protezione degli eroi, erano tornati a disperdersi nello stato eslege, ch'è l'Orco de' poeti, il quale divoravasi il tutto degli uomini"<sup>42</sup>. The "dominio bonitario" and the "dominio quiritario" are represented, instead, by "due serpi avvoltevi (...), con le due ali in capo alla verga (per significar il dominio eminente degli ordini) e con cappello pur alato (per raffermarne l'alta ragione sovrana libera, come il cappello restò geroglifico di libertà)"<sup>43</sup>.

The last god, Neptune, would represent the reaching of a certain refinement of naval techniques and nautical subjects. In the creation of this god, anyway, there was almost the beginning of the second age of history, the one of heroes, in which further changes and complications in human relationships occurred. Vico, in fact, affirmed that

Tutti gli storici danno il principio al secolo eroico coi sorseggi di Minosse e con la spedizione navale che fece Giasone in Ponto, il prosieguimento con la guerra troiana, il fine con gli error degli eroi, che vanno a terminare nel ritorno

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> Ivi, p. 942; cpv. 1064; ivi, p. 683; cpv. 560, in which Vico used the fable of Erocle gallico also a symbol of the "colonie mediterranee" (Mediterranean colonies). On the same subject, it is advised to read R. Bassi, *Favole vere e severe*, cit., pp. 117-129.

<sup>41</sup> G.B. Vico, *SN* 44, cit., p. 709; cpv. 600.

<sup>42</sup> Ivi, p. 713; cpv. 604.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

di Ulisse in Itaca. Laonde in tali tempi dovette nascere l'ultima delle maggiori divinità, la qual fu Nettunno, per questa autorità degli storici, la qual noi avvaloriamo con una ragion filosofica, assistita dai più luoghi d'oro d'Omero. La ragion filosofica è che l'arti navale e nautica sono gli ultimi ritrovati delle nazioni, perché vi bisognò fior d'ingegno per ritrovarle<sup>44</sup>.

## **2.4 The passage to the second age of history and the birth of new types of myth**

The contribution of new techniques and the acquisition of the first forms of progress reached by the various communities were not enough to prevent the discontent that had emerged previously. The social upheaval and the demands for equality by the poor provoked, as their direct consequence in fact, the noble's tightening and the necessity to build a new social order, adequate to the changes of time. In addition to this, if progress led on the one hand to the improvement in life conditions, on the other hand it stimulated new needs and these novelties reverberated throughout social relationships<sup>45</sup>.

So, the number of struggles increased: the evidence of this fresh outbreak was confirmed by the various fables that narrated the acts of piracy made by different populations. All this was even more witnessed by the heroes' behavior, getting worse and worse, and the introduction of the habit of living in a constant state of war against the neighbouring towns<sup>46</sup>. Therefore, new mythological figures were born, like the ones of Marsia, Lino, Orfeo, Mida which joined the old ones, that is to say the major divinities.

The most emblematic figures of this age (the age of heroes) were Ulysses and Achilles, who clearly expressed the features of a phase in which rules and laws were established by "collerici e puntigliosi"<sup>47</sup> (irascible and obstinate) habits and by a right "della forza, ove sono, o, se vi sono, non vagliono, le umane leggi a raffrenarla"<sup>48</sup>. The former was the "fantastic universal" of shrewdness and the capacity to adapt to different situations, whereas the latter represented strength and courage.

The Homeric narration having the Proci as its protagonists who, taking advantage of Ulysses's absence, tried to seduce Penelope, was interpreted by Vico as a further example of these disputes; in particular, this could be considered as another case of double interpretation that defines another concept, the one of "secum ipse discors"<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>44</sup> Ivi, pp. 731-732; cpv. 634.

<sup>45</sup> "Gli uomini prima sentono il necessario, di poi badano all'utile, appresso avvertiscono il comodo, più innanzi si diletano del piacere, quindi si dissolvono nel lusso, e finalmente impazzano in istrapazzar le sostanze". Ivi, pp. 519-520; cpv. 241.

<sup>46</sup> Ivi, p. 736; cpv. 639.

<sup>47</sup> Ivi, p. 861; cpv. 920.

<sup>48</sup> Ivi, p. 862; cpv. 923.

<sup>49</sup> Ivi, pp. 742-743; cpv. 654.

So the myth was assumed by the Neapolitan philosopher in a dynamic and evolutionary way, in which the changes occurred in the socio-political structure were reflected in the various fantastic universals elaborated each time by men.

As we have already seen, Vico initially presented those divinities that embodied a “spiritual dimension”, that is to say principles like religion and marriage, whose institution was produced by fear, and successively those gods and goddesses that represented a “material dimension”<sup>50</sup>, in whose context men’s actual and body needs got more and more urgent (for example, feeding, looking for stable settlements, joining, protecting themselves etc.). Materiality, expressed by the occupation of a physical space and the institution of the first work forms, expanded until it provoked the first social struggles. In a sense, then, it was not difficult to make the hypothesis that for Vico spirituality represented the foundation and the primary bond of society, at least in the first phase of history. Later on, once reached internal stability, those communities were pervaded by material necessities which increased more and more, so defining class distinction and the first social claims. At that moment the process inverted: material necessity (the poor’s social and economic situation) represented the crucial premise to conquer spiritual values. In fact, the poor ardently wished to have access to the rites, the customs and the language of the “heroes”. From this point of view, it can be affirmed that Vico’s concept of history was characterized by a double polarity that inverted every time a historical cycle finished.

Without forcing Vico’s intention we could affirm that he, almost anticipating Max Weber<sup>51</sup>, pointed out as in a first moment it was the religious and spiritual contents to influence the genesis of material factors; in a second time, forerunning Marx’s thought<sup>52</sup>, it was the latter to prevail and to become the cornerstone around which spiritual values<sup>53</sup> revolved. However, materiality was never considered by Vico as the driving force of history, as the poor had as their objective, above all, the conquest of cultural prerogatives which they were excluded from; for example, one of them was the language spoken by the nobles. In fact, once triggered this process, proper to reach equality, the various divinities were interpreted by the poor in different ways, and sometimes expressed in a hybrid form, as in the case of “secum ipse discors”.

The passage from the first two ages (age of gods and age of heroes) to the last one (age of men) provoked a loss in the language and thought poeticalness,

<sup>50</sup> G.A. Gualtieri, *Conoscenza e sviluppo del mondo umano nella filosofia di Giambattista Vico*, cit., pp. 95-96.

<sup>51</sup> M. Weber, *Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (1905), Berlin, Springer, 2015.

<sup>52</sup> K. Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1859.

<sup>53</sup> About these and other aspects of this article, it is advised to read G.A. Gualtieri, *Conoscenza e sviluppo del mondo umano nella filosofia di Giambattista Vico*, cit.; Id., *La creazione delle «dodici divinità delle genti maggiori» nella Scienza nuova di Giambattista Vico*, cit.

with the consequent reduction of myths to mere decorative factors or, really, to deleterious details for men's education. However, this phase, in which reason was prevailing, was not completely idyllic or free from problems, as it could represent the prelude to the formation of a new barbarism, the one that the Neapolitan thinker called "barbarie ritornata". Therefore, it is necessary to accept to set up a balance among sense, fantasy and reason, without forgetting those values that a strict rationality prevents us from considering as fundamental.

### 3. Conclusions

With his idea of the myth, Vico definitively clarified his particular vision of philology, meant as a "nuova arte critica" (new critical art), in which philosophy played a crucial role. Abandoning the traditional conviction that wanted philology to be a mere list of facts, Vico emphasized the preponderant role of the interpretation of documents in order to catch the historical datum in its fullness.

In Vico's opinion, the myth was a complex and problematic factor, also because it reopened the whole question about the same concepts of "true" and "falsity". According to him, the dichotomy true/false was not obvious as it was usually thought. The truth applied to the myth, in fact, did not have in falsity its dialectic pole, since the question true/false, in order to be settled, required an extension towards the historical plan, after which both the concepts of truth and falsity were relative, as both were the fruit of a historical development and of the culture one belonged to<sup>54</sup>. According to Vico, the truth was not caught in its immediacy by human mind, but through a creative construction, made alive as images, things acquired the dimension of essences that characterized the world. So the structure of a meaningful universe was disclosed, in which man established his dimension. In this way the *vis imaginativa* provoked the passage between the simple and immediate feeling of things and the rational world. Before the mystery of reality, primitive men reacted by using their *vis imaginativa* and creating inwardly an apparatus of significant images that gave birth to an imaginary world, which, anyway, ended up by representing all reality, endowing it with a semantic dimension. Therefore, the truth was not the result of the correspondence that was established between mental images and external reality but it followed the rule of co-belonging, according to which it was not possible to know reality independently of the explanatory frame inside which things appeared. Vico was opposed to the utilitarians, also because he stated that men could never have given a meaning to the world of they had not been able to transcend the immediacy of empiric sensations.

<sup>54</sup> R. Bassi, *Favole vere e severe*, cit., pp. 34-50.

Being the foundation of the anthropological structures of mankind, the myth became the fundamental factor for every form of knowledge and it was the framework which human thought settled in, a scheme that not only originated it, but it went with it in its course and recorded its most characterizing phases.

The myth is the condensation of the various passions and human feelings, both spiritual and material. In Vico's opinion, it would be with the diffusion of a rigid rationality, blocked in itself and far from the aptitude to form myths, that society would degenerate into a new and crueller barbarism<sup>55</sup>. To conclude, the "fantastic universals" showed the existence of a *ratio* in history, founded on spiritual, utilitarian and material needs. Once fixed in the context of "senso comune" (common meaning), these myths remained impressed in men's memory, and became consolidated as universal principles, depositaries of the *auctoritas* that, in Vico's opinion, strongly influenced by classical culture and especially by Roman law, showed the existence of an order which was present in history. So historical memory – according to Vico – was not negative, as Nietzsche would state more than a century later, in his work *Untzeigemässe Betrachtungen, Zweites Stück: Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (1874), but on the contrary, it was a reference horizon to understand the course of history and, more generally, the foundations any human action was based on.

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<sup>55</sup> G.B. Vico, *SN 44*, cit., p. 967; cpv. 1106.

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