



CENTER FOR
HELLENIC
STUDIES
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

First Drafts@ CLASSICS@

"Vico's Homer and the "Oral Versus Written" Dilemma"

Steven M. Berry

Note: The author is in the process of revising this manuscript and welcomes suggestions and corrections. Please email him at yagoda@pioneernet.net.

VICO'S HOMER AND THE "ORAL VERSUS WRITTEN" DILEMMA

by Steven M. Berry, Ph.D.

Verisimilia namque vera inter et falsa sunt quasi media.

"For indeed, probabilities (things that seem true) are midway, more or less, between true things and false things." My translation

— Giambattista Vico, *De nostri temporis Studiorum Ratione* (1709)

Tutte l'antiche storie profane hanno favolosi in principi.

"All the profane stories of antiquity were originally recited orally, as fables."

(my translation)

§122. It is . . . [a] property of the human mind that whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand.

—Giambattista Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*
(Bergrin and Fisch translation)

INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for this study has come from the enthusiasm which Gregory Nagy, Francis Jones Professor of Classics at Harvard University, has shared with me over several years regarding the insights of Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) into the true nature of Homeric transmission. Vico's appeal for Nagy, and for most Vico specialists, as well, resides in the Neapolitan's visionary realization, at least in *places* throughout his *opus*, that the common image of the "blind singer" as it has come down through the European tradition is a distortion, because it has consistently presented one supreme, universally lionized yet existentially elusive "oral poet who" left to posterity a pair of epic masterpieces which were eventually transformed into "texts." In these *loci* Vico describes a *group* of blind, destitute singers wandering throughout Greece. Vico had empirical paradigms available in his personal memory for the *possibility* of such figures as illiterate alternatives to the storied literary genius "Homer." Meanwhile, this latter static icon serves as an authority supporting Vico's theories of history. Hence the salient aspect of Vico's perspective on Homer, whether taken as conceptual augury or inconsistent problematic, is its ambiguity.

Regarding his own response to Vico, Professor Nagy has said to me, "I find

him so *intuitive*.” In this vein he has written:

If we adopt a teleological view of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as the culmination of a long tradition, then the intuitions of Giambattista Vico on Homer will prove to be more fruitful in this regard than the labors of l’abbé d’Aubignac or even F.A. Wolf.¹

Nagy thinks along the same lines as Isaiah Berlin, who heads his chapter titled “The Philosophical Ideas of Giambattista Vico” from his great study *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) with an 1830 quotation from the French social philosopher Pierre-Simon Ballanche: “Singulière destiné que celle de cet home! Lui qui fut si intuitif, il sort du tombeau lorsqu’il n’a plus rien à nous dire” (p. 21, my emphasis). I translate: “What a singular destiny for this man! He was so intuitive, yet he emerges from the grave at a time when he has nothing more to tell us.”² Thus does Berlin establish perhaps the major critical conundrum regarding Vico when he quotes Ballanche the underachieving French Romantic prophet trying to pull the rug

¹ *Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. .

² Ballanche’s disdainful “il n’a rien plus à nous dire” may seem gratuitous unless we remember that the historian Jules Michelet “imported” Vico into French literature with an abridged translation of the *Scienza Nuova*. It was published in 1824, three years before Victor Hugo’s Romantic play *Cromwell*. Hugo’s declaration in his ebulliently latecoming, doctrinaire “Préface” that “la poésie a trois âges” leaves no doubt that Michelet’s Vico impressed him. And just to show how far forward this idea reverberated, James Joyce, who “appropriated” the Vichian triplet as a thematic element of *Finnigans Wake*, recommended the Michelet abridgement to his friends who could not read Italian. Significantly, Michelet also translated Vico’s Seventh Oration, known as the *De nostri*, which I will be taking up shortly.

out from under Vico the underachieving Italian “pre-Romantic” prophet. Such a characterization of “belatedness” (Harold Bloom’s general critical term), which tacitly indicates the discovery of his work in Romantic Age Europe nearly a century after his death, demonstrates how soon Vico’s original Cassandra-like reception became a part of his legacy, somehow bringing van Gogh to mind. As I shall be explicating in detail, no aspect of Vico’s work reflects this critical ambivalence better than his entry into the “Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns.” And his intuitive powers are nowhere more evident than in his pluralistic understanding of “The Homeric Question,” which was a major subcategory of the Quarrel. In “Idea of the Work,” Vico’s introduction to the 1744 edition of his masterpiece the *Principij di Scienza Nuova d’intorno alla commune Natura delle Nazione*, or *Scienza nouva*, he reveals that he considers the conventional literary view of “Homer” fundamentally misguided:

§6. . . . Unknown until now, he [= the image of the Homer who “wrote”] has held hidden from us the true facts of the fabulous [i.e., “preliterate”; hence also. “pre-record”] period among the nations, and much more so those of the obscure [my emphasis] period which all had despaired of knowing, and consequently the first true origins of the things of the historic period.³

Concepts that one can associate with the *Ursprung* of an oral-evolutionary poetic

³ Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, translators, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 5. I shall be referring to this standard edition throughout. Hereafter I shall not cite by the page; initial numbers refer to paragraphs. Except where indicated, I cite the translation verbatim.

model are right there before us: “Unknown until now”; “fabulous period” (that is, reflecting an oral tradition); “first true origins”; plus a contrastive “historic period.” If one were to try to characterize most of today’s oral-evolutionary poetic models with a “pseudo-Vichian” thesis statement, one might reasonably turn to §6 as a template, with a result that would look something like this: “Before Parry and Lord did their pioneering fieldwork among the South Slavic *gúslars*, the obscure origins of Homeric oral composition were virtually hypothetical, having, at best only a slim empirical basis. Ironically, this erstwhile obscurity has also led to controversies about Homeric composition and transmission.”

As Vico’s inveterate use of the singular “Homer” throughout *most* of the *Scienza Nuova* indicates, one is ultimately forced to view him as ambivalent. Vico does not even launch full-bore into his theory of oral Homeric poetics until he reaches the middle of his greater argument, in Book III. In other places Homer serves Vico as a sort of “child of alphabets,” an historian, an *auctoritas* whom Vico calls upon to legitimate his tripartite, recursive theory of history, for which he has already laid the groundwork in preliminary parts of the work. In this alternative treatment, Homer takes “his” place at the head of all the other sublime “authorities” of the so-called “Classical corpus.” The reader should bear in mind that I am deliberately using this inexact term *passim* to emphasize that

Vico was actually quite a credulous receptor of ancient testimony and opinion. This is anaphora (“referring back”; “repetition”) on my part meant to emphasize that Vico’s “scientific evidence” for his “vero Omero” was divided between the testimony that the ancient Greek and Latin authors provided him on one side, and more "modernist" anti-authoritarian models, both intuitive and empirical, that he “discovers” in Book III of the *Scienza Nuova* on the other. Vico’s dualistic portrayal of Homer represents more than equivocation driven by iconoclastic intellectual zeal. It is also the legacy of a body of knowledge (*sapienza*), a true, sincere epistemology. in which, as Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Naples, Vico was expected to be proficient.

I digress here to make the essential point that Vico’s confidence in the authority and historicity of the Classical corpus also accounts for his rejection throughout his works of the ground principle René Descartes (1596-1650), expressed in his 1637 *Discours de la méthode* (*Discourse on Method*), that literature and history, indeed the traditional humanities in general, are entertaining but philosophically useless. As he says at the very start about his intellectually misspent youth:

. . . [J]e croyais avoir déjà donné assez de temps aux langues, et même aussi à la lecture des livres anciens, et à leurs histoires, et à leurs fables. Car c'est quasi le même de converser avec ceux des autres siècles que de voyager. Il est bon de savoir quelque chose des mœurs de divers peuples, afin de juger des nôtres plus sainement, et que nous ne pensions pas que tout ce qui est contre nos modes

soit ridicule et contre raison, ainsi qu'ont coutume de faire ceux qui n'ont rien vu. Mais lorsqu'on emploie trop de temps à voyager, on devient enfin étranger en son pays; et lorsqu'on est trop curieux des choses qui se pratiquaient aux siècles passés, on demeure ordinairement fort ignorant de celles qui se pratiquent en celui-ci. . .

..

(“. . . I thought I had already devoted enough time to languages, and also to reading the ancient books, and their histories, and their fables. [cf. the first quote on my title page]. For it is almost the same thing to converse with people of other centuries as it is to travel. It is good to know something about the customs of diverse peoples, in order to judge our own more rationally, and so that we won't think that everything is foreign to our ways is ridiculous or unreasonable, such as those who have never seen anything are in the habit of doing. But when one takes too much time traveling, one ends up a stranger in one's own country; and when one becomes too curious about how things were done in ages past, one ordinarily lives in great ignorance of how things are done in this one. . . ." My translation)

A comparison is in order here. Nowhere in the *Scienza Nuova* does Vico express his anti-Cartesian position with greater rhetorical force and concentration than in this quote from the "Elements" section of Book I:

§122. It is . . . [a] property of the human mind that whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand.

Observe that within the scope of these two quotes Descartes and Vico apparently have opposite conceptions of what constitutes true knowledge, though they both use essentially the same term: for Descartes, *scientia*; for Vico, *scienza*. Vico embraces the very criteria for judgement that Descartes rejected. How this dichotomy came to be forms the basis of my analysis of Vico's Homer.

In the *Discours*, Descartes provides a remarkably Vichian account of his “discovery” of what has become known as “Cartesian Rationalism” almost as if it were one of Vico’s *favole*. It seems that he was only 18, and had recently joined the German army. He says that on November 10, 1619, at the army’s winter quarters on the Danube, Descartes had a complex and illuminating dream (an epiphany worthy of the Homeric Penelope or Agamemnon, or Cicero’s vision of Scipio Aemelianus in the *De re publica*) during which the philosopher “divined” how to apply algebra to geometry to create the *mathematicae novae* of analytic and coordinate geometry. The salient feature for our purposes of Descartes’ confessed discoveries is that although they are “scientific” in the sense of aiming for “certainty,” they are by definition *a priori*, and thus hostile to any competing notion of a reality based on “the tangible,” “the anecdotal,” “the historical,” or “the institutional.” In the same spirit with which Plato implements mathematics (particularly geometry) to counteract the false reasoning that rhetoric introduces into dialectic (the aim of which is to apprehend what the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, in its article on Descartes’ epistemology, terms “the infeasible”—i.e., “that which nothing can annul”), Descartes moves confidently from the unerring accuracy/“truth” of coordinate geometry to the principle that a philosopher should, in rebellion against “unscientific” Aristotelianism, methodically exclude interfering phenomenal factors such as “history” and

"literature" in order to address the highest philosophical questions: "what can we know?" and "How can we know it?"

Descartes adopted this position very early, but not without simultaneously conceding the merits of the Ancients. In a 2007 paper, Thomas O. Hueglin observes that

Descartes' philosophical-scientific ambition was enormous, and he pursued it with the kind of rigour of someone who knew exactly what he was aiming for. Upon his return from Germany, he put his mind to the composition, in Latin, of *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (*Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii* [ca. 1628]), in which he first conceptualized the outlines of a universal scientific system entirely based on the mathematical logic of "the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind, which proceeds solely from the light of reason" (*mentis purae et attentae non dubium conceptum, qui a sola ratione lucis nascitur*). What is thus "clear and certain" (*evidens et certum*), has to be distinguished from "ordinary philosophy" (*philosophia vulgaris*) with its assertions merely based on "probable conjectures" (*probabilibus tantum conjecturis*) The *Rules* remained uncompleted and were not published during his lifetime.⁴

Key concepts that Descartes would explicate fully in the vernacular in 1637 appear here first in Latin (i.e., *non dubium conceptum; evidens et certum*), as well as a characteristic demotion of epistemological value for the Aristotelian confidence in the probable as a standard of proof (i.e., *probabilibus tantum*

⁴ Thomas O. Hueglin, "Descartes v. Vico: Some Observations about the Importance of the Method of Inquiry in the History of Political Thought," Paper prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association. University of Saskatchewan, May 30-June 1, 2007.

conjecturis).⁵ Hueglin shows what a single-minded Rationalist Descartes remained by adding that “the *Discourse* not only contained the aforementioned autobiographical wintery episode in Germany, but also Descartes’ most famous statement: *je pense, donc je suis*, or, as it became better known from the later Latin edition, *cogito, ergo sum*.” But Hueglin also understands something vital about Descartes’ philosophical development that largely explains Vico’s *rejection* of Descartes’ method. As Hueglin says,

In the *Rules*, Descartes still is relatively appreciative of past achievements. “We ought to read the writings of the ancients, in order to learn what truths have already been discovered” (*quae jam olim* [“once upon a time”] *recte inventa sunt*). . . . But then he immediately offers a number of reservations about such historical open-mindedness: not only will these ancients try to convince us of their point of view by ensnaring us with their most “subtle [i.e., “deceptive,” like the *subtil* Serpent in the Garden of Eden] arguments” (*subtilissimis argumentis*), they will also “begrudge us the plain truth” (*nobis invident apertam veritatem*) because “hardly anything is said by one writer the contrary of which is not asserted by some other” (*quicquam ab uno dictum est, cujus contrarium ab aliquo alio non afferatur*). (p. 7)

My underlining and bracketed interpolations emphasize that Vico consciously appropriated to his own project the very glossary of bygone fable that Descartes, with equal deliberateness, dismissively ascribed to the folly of youth.

Descartes begins his epistemology from the position that a philosopher who attempts to discover “the truth” must begin by subjecting all reasonably

⁵ For Vico’s contrasting *dependence* on aspects of Aristotelian rhetoric, see below.

held conviction (*persuasio*⁶) to systematic Doubt. The only two things that one need not doubt are that one is thinking, and that therefore this thinker *must* exist: “Je pense, donc je suis”; “Cogito ergo sum.” As a Rationalist in the mold of the middle and later Plato, Descartes seeks to determine exactly what can be known “clearly and distinctly” *prior to* experience, since, as Plato consistently held, the pleasure (*hēdōnē*) elicited by the rhetorical tricks of persuasion (*peitho*) interferes with the rational apprehension of reality. Because Descartes systematically doubts the veracity of the world outside the individual mind, Cartesian epistemology has been termed “internalist”; as such, it is also “anti-historical,” designed produce a cognition of reality that is not subject to “deceitful” factors such as the rhetorical powers of *l'autrui* (Sartre’s famous word, commonly rendered as “other people”) or the vagaries of cultural change,

Vico, on the other hand, considers *il vero* both a function of human

⁶ Descartes’ use of *persuasio* with this meaning is interesting for two reasons. First, it reminds one of Plato’s criticism of Sophistic understandings of truth as the results of display rhetoric (*epideixis*) rather than of dialectical cross-examination (*ēlenkhos*). The Greek equivalent of *persuasio* is *pístis*; the English equivalent is “conviction,” and is stronger than “opinion” (*dóxa*), but weaker than “knowledge” (Greek: *epístēmē*, Latin: *scientia*).

Descartes to Regius, 24 May 1640: "Quae duo ita distinguo, ut persuasio sit, cum superest aliqua ratio quae nos possit ad dubitandum impellere; scientia vero sit persuasio a ratione tam forti, ut nulla unquam fortiore concuti possit; qualem nullam habent qui Deum ignorant." ("I distinguish the two as follows: that it is a 'conviction' [*persuasio*] whenever some reason remains that compels us to doubt; in truth, 'knowledge' [*scientia*] is conviction [*persuasio*] that is so strong that it cannot be shaken by any stronger reason; those who do not know God have neither kind.")

experience “writ large” and a matter of constant change. For this reason, he tells us in §122 that his “science” is designed for delving into the past, into things that are “distant and unknown”; the *télos* of his project is to “uncover” these things. But he also says that wherever evidence from the past has been lost, we can only make “judgments” (= “intuitions”?) based on what is “familiar.” His evidence for “truth” comes from two sources almost exclusively: the testimony of past authorities, and analogous empirical institutions and practices from his own day. In contrast to the Cartesian reliance on the individual’s internal thought processes, Vico’s criteria for the variegated, palpable, temporally determined “truths” of human experience can be termed “externalist.” This perspective is epitomized in Vico’s motto “*verum factum est*” (“the true is what has been made”). In sum, Vico is interested in discovering the very mechanisms of (Western European) cultural origination, development, and change.

The twentieth-century model for the transmission of Homeric epic generally designated as the “Parry-Lord Hypothesis” operates according to criteria similar the ones Vico mentions in §122. Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord strove to elucidate the **distant and (relatively) unknown** characteristics of oral-formulaic poetics in preliterate Greece under the agonizing handicap of having no modern Hellenic approximation of either the Archaic *oidós* or the Panhellenic *rhapsôidós* of Peisistratos’ day (sixth century BCE) and following. So

they were compelled to make **judgments** about what these performative traditions may have been like based on analogies from unrelated living traditions that were **familiar and at hand**. In their “Introduction” to the 2000 Second Edition of Albert B. Lord’s *Singer of Tales*, Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy indicate that Milman Parry was certain from the start as to the kind of evidence he hoped to gather:

During his years in Paris (1925-1928), Parry had made contact with Manija Murko, who at that time was the most eminent ethnographer working on South Slavic (Serbo-Croatian) oral tradition in the former Yugoslavia. . . . Still, the South Slavic Balkans were not Parry’s first choice for his scientific experiment [cf. *scientia* / *scienza*]. According to his student Albert Lord, Parry had hoped to conduct its project in the former Soviet Union (following up on ethnographic work that dated back to the late nineteenth century, especially Radloff’s collection of Kara Kirghiz epics from Central Asia) Political events in that part of the world made it difficult to obtain a visa, however, and Parry was forced to look elsewhere. Once he had settled on the South Slavic area, he began to design a master plan for testing his hypotheses on the still-vibrant traditions of oral epic in the Balkans.⁷

If one asks why Parry was hoping to study Central Asian epic, two reasons suggest themselves: (1) he was trying to move as far away as possible from the interference of a parallel—though obviously shorter—written tradition (which Lord considered a particularly serious issue) and (2) he needed a model that

⁷ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), page ix.

could demonstrate sustenance over very long recitation periods of the kind Minna Skafté Jensen cites. In her contribution to the *Companion to Ancient Epic*, entitled “Performance” (pp. 45-54), she marshals an impressive array of examples of still viable nonliterate epic traditions:

Oral epic belongs to the wonders of humanity. . . Singers are expected to be in command of huge traditional stories and ready to perform for hours on end. The Kirghiz bard Jusup Mamay performed his version of the Manas epic in 1979; it amounted to almost 200,000 lines and was published in 18 volumes 1984-95. [In addition,] he knew 11 other epics. . . . The Tibetan Gesar epic was sung by “Old Man Thepa” in a version of 600,000 lines. . . . The Mongolian Jangar epic was published in twelve volumes 1985-96; in this case more than a hundred singers contributed. . . In northern Africa, Sirat Bani Hilal, an Arabic tradition taking its stories from the immigration of the Hilal tribe during the tenth to twelfth centuries, has been studied by several scholars since the last few decades of the twentieth century. A Tunisian singer, Mohammed Hsini, recited a 20-hour version over sessions between 1974 and 1980, and the recording ran to over 1000 manuscript pages. . . In lower Egypt, Shaykh Biyali Abu Fahmi sang a 32-hour version. . . . (p. 46, my emphases)

This passage mitigates any position that exhibits “writerly” skepticism regarding the worldwide prodigiousness of the oral poet’s memory and capacity for instantaneous creative decisions. And this is merely a sample of the evidence against a *necessary and automatic* introduction of writing into the transmission of epic. Any contemporary bibliography on the subject provides abundant counter-examples to the early adoption of writing.

As we shall see, Nagy’s work has an innate affinity with Vico intuitionist

treatment of archaic culture in the *Scienza Nuova*. This is principally because Vico wants a paradigm that allows for the evolution of forms. In turn, Nagy's position makes it possible to for me to stress Vico's intuition about the multiform nature and Panhellenic distribution of Homeric *poiēsis* in the Archaic period. Consider this oft-cited passage from the *Scienza nuova*. Book III:

§875. [T]he reason why the Greek peoples so vied with each other for the honor of being his fatherland, and why almost all claimed him as citizen, is that the Greek peoples were themselves Homer.

In effect, §875 is a thesis statement that describes the special significance of Book III in light of the historical thrust of the rest of Vico's argument. For as well as demonstrating to the European intellectual community at large his knowledge of Homer *as subject* in the lore, it anticipates modern oral-evolutionary paradigms. Vico recognizes the diachronic "Homer" as a Panhellenic cultural phenomenon rather than merely a legendary figure. From §6 onward Vico orients his audience toward his position that the proper "scientific" way to interpret the anachronisms within a unified "Homeric text" in a way that makes sense is to think of them as vestiges of a long and geographically dispersed cultural phenomenon. A signal example from Book III is at §804-§805:

§804. Yet we do not see how to reconcile so many refined customs with the many wild and savage ones which he attributes to his heroes at the same time, and particularly in the *Iliad*. So that, lest

barbarous acts be confounded with Gentile [*gentile*]⁸ ones—*ne placidis coeant immitia*⁹—we must suppose that the two poems were composed and compiled by various hands through successive ages.

If we focus for a moment on Vico's rationale for positing a diachronic interpretation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, we see a things that further justify the relatively cautious label "intuitive" in place of a stronger approving phrase that might have pleased Vico more, like "empirically vindicated through cultural study." Here Vico's explanation of Homer's anachronisms says nothing of either his beloved *ancilla*, etymology. or the fledgling science of archaeology. Rather, it is based on his anti-Cartesian "method" of seeking evidence from the Classical corpus. In this case, what model does Vico cite for interpreting Homer's anachronisms? The authoritative analysis of the Roman Horace. Thus Vico's "intuition" about the traditional error in antiquity of personifying Homer against the evidence of preliterate Hellenic diversity, even if it is genuine, has important limitations, as the next paragraph indicates:

§805. Thus, from what we have here said of the fatherland and of the age of Homer as he has hitherto been held to be, our doubts take courage for the search for the true Homer.

Again, the ambiguity on which I base my argument is manifest, as well; §875 also

⁸ On construing this word, see below.

⁹ Vico misquotes Horace ever-so-slightly at *Ars poetica*, line 12: ". . . sed non ut placidis coeant immitia."

represents the culmination of a line of reasoning that seeks to provide an empirical basis for, e.g., the never-ending “historical” rivalry in antiquity among cities for the prestige of being the synchronic “Homer’s” birthplace. These traditions, while complex and often hard to trace, basically come from the Classical corpus.

Can Gregory Nagy’s appreciation for Vico’s intuition justifiably be called upon to elucidate aspects of Vico’s Homer theory? Most emphatically, yes. Something that has always struck me as I have studied Nagy’s work is how resistive many of his colleagues have been to what is perhaps the most important aspect of his model: namely, that it is faithful to the theories of his predecessor Albert B. Lord in treating the transmission of epic as a primarily creative rather than a simply mnemonic *tekhnē*, because “bards” as understood in the diachronic aggregate sustained oral poetry for millennia before the invention of writing. Even though the understanding of Homeric *poiēsis* known as the “oral-evolutionary model” is no longer in dispute as a general framework, there remains considerable controversy as to what role writing played in it. The usual charge that Nagy’s critics level against him actually comes in the form of a substitution. That is, for the *oidós* (“singer”), or trained oral performer working before the advent of recording through writing, scholars like Barry F. Powell, Richard Janko, and M.L. West feel compelled to posit the cultural substitution

very early of a *rhapsoidós* (“stitcher-together”), a real figure establishing some crystallized “proto-form” which restricted or discouraged the performer from “composing in performance,” as Nagy prefers to say. The source of this impulse to posit an end to a strictly oral-performative phrase is a manifest skepticism that oral transmission could have taken place over a such a long period of time and such a large (i.e., Panhellenic) area without some alphabetic aid. A second area of skepticism regarding Nagy’s position has to do with the Alexandrian editorial process itself. While it seems that most critics interpret variants that show up in the papyri and scholia as conjectural or corrective work by editors, Nagy sees no necessary reason why they could not also be alternatives generated by the oral tradition, because the chronological, geographical, and dialectical scopes of the transmission were so vast.

In the spirit of Vico, I argue that the archaic culture of illiterate “composers-in-performance” that the Parry-Lord Hypothesis describes is often concealed in the writings of antiquity. What follows is an elaborate example. In Chapter 4 of *Inventing Homer: the Early Reception of Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), entitled “Blindness, Poverty, and Closeness to the Gods,” Barbara Graziosi tracks down the multiple sources of these particular Homeric attributes in ancient times. One of her findings is that neither Homer’s renowned blindness nor his poverty have always been part of his *persona*. The

brilliance of her presentation consists in her citing contradictory opinions to undercut the assumption that the image of Homer was stable in antiquity. At the same time, she demonstrates that at one point or another, the solitary blind singer wandering throughout the Greek-speaking world¹⁰ depending on handouts in gratitude for his matchless song became canonical. She observes:

The riddling description of the unnamed poet in the *Hymn to Apollo* 172f. . . . says that he lives in Chios, is blind, and composes poems that will excel forever. This was promptly taken to be a description of Homer by Thucydides and others. . . . This etymology [= “Homer” as actually meaning “blind”] is frequently mentioned in the ancient biographies of Homer and we can conjecture, with a certain degree of confidence, that it was advocated by the Cymeian historian Euphorus. Blindness, moreover, is a dominant feature in the iconography of Homer. (p. 126)

Graziosi next quotes the Second Sophistic rhetorician and fabulist Lucian (born in what is now Syria ca. 120 CE), a native speaker of Aramaic who—as a prolific, improvising, witty, often even sarcastic *raconteur*—fulfilled the cultural function of a sort of a Second Sophistic *rhapsoidós* himself. The passage in question pretends to record an encounter with the “real author” Homer in which Lucian asks him about a number of “unresolved issues” that are part of his legend:

. . . I went up to the poet Homer, when we were both at leisure, and asked him, among other things, where he came from, pointing out that this was still being investigated among us to this day. He said, “I am aware that some think I am from Chios, others from Smyrna

¹⁰ In antiquity the geographical distribution of the Greek language encompassed both Greece proper and Asia Minor. Evidence that Vico was possibly ignorant of this is in *Scienza Nuova* §878, which I cite shortly.

and many from Colophon, but in fact I am Babylonian, and among my fellow-citizens I am not called Homer, but Tigranes. Afterwards, when I became a hostage [*homereuo*] to the Greeks, I changed my name." I also enquired about the athetised lines, and asked if he had written [*gegrammaténoi*] them. He said that they were all composed [*grammatōn*: "written"] by himself. As a result, he rejected the work of Zenodotus, Aristarchus and their followers as utter nonsense. When he had given satisfactory answers to these questions, I asked why he started with the wrath of Achilles, and he said that it had occurred to him just like this, without any preparation. I also wanted to know whether he wrote the *Odyssey* before the *Iliad* as most people claim and he said he had not. That he was not blind—because they say that about him—I found out at once: he could see, so I did not have to ask. (Lucian, *Verae Historiae*, 2. 20; Graziosi's translation, my emphasis, p. 127)

I propose reading Lucian's tale for the present purposes as having a Vichian "deep structure." From this perspective it becomes a synchronic *allegorēsis* of the diachronic process through which "Homer" shifted gradually from an oral tradition to a set of received texts; as such it is what today's critical theorists would be inclined to call "readerly." As such it represents a synopsis of much of the lore about the most sublime *poiētēs* of all time that had accrued over the centuries. Lucian wants his "sophisticated" audience to enjoy his tall tale, which is directed at the Homeric tradition. This is why his questions concern conflicting details about the specifically *literary* Homer. He conspicuously places the encounter in the context of the Alexandrian *diorthōsis* (comprehensive scholarly textual correction) of Homer. The joke is that this Homer is fully aware that some of his lines have been "athetized"—tagged as possibly

inauthentic—by Zenodotus, Aristarchus, and succeeding editors. Lucian’s Homer thinks that the very idea of imputing inauthentic lines to *him*—of all “authorities”—is nonsense. I interpret this affronted dismissal as Lucian’s comment on the preposterousness of trying to maintain the image of a single literary Homer within the context of an oral tradition. Lucian’s “punch line” is that, if this particular incarnate Homer actually created the poetry that has been ascribed to him, then he must really be immortal, as per his *kléos*,¹¹ or at least

¹¹ This foundational word, expeditiously rendered in typical modern explications of Homer as “glory” or “fame,” more accurately designates the song that the Archaic Hellenic heroes aspire to be worthy of having sung about them in perpetuity. I propose that *kléos* applies equally to the singers themselves. Indeed, this is the direction Grogory Nagy takes in Chapter 1 of *The Best of the Achaeans*, Revised Edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 16:

Enter Demodokos, the blind poet of the Phaeacians in *Odyssey* viii. This figure *Dêmodokos*, ‘received by the *dêmos*’ . . . is an appropriate idealization of an artist by the art form of epic. Through the persona of Demodokos, the epic of the *Odyssey* can express many things about itself as a composition—far beyond what the medium of performance could let the poet say in his own persona when he invoked his own Muse. As Samuel Bassett has remarked in another connection, “Homer has carefully groomed the Phaeacian bard for his part.”

Though Nagy does not use the word *kléos* specifically here, he clearly presents Demodokos as representing a “medium of performance” being passed along from one generation of singers to the next. This evolutionary movement would seem to entail the supposition that some singers over the generations are renowned for their superiority to most singers. A term one can reasonably apply to this principle is *kléos*. That Demodokos has been “groomed” to be a superior singer reminds us of the superiority of certain guslars, like Avdo Međedović and Ćor Huso, whom A.B. Lord singles out in *Singer of Tales*. Though a relative few have heard them in person, we have all heard that they were extraordinary.

If we accept this as a working principle, then, I argue, *kléos* by extension can

venerable in a decrepit way, rather like one of Swift's Struldbrugs in *Gulliver's Travels*. So much for the *age* of the tradition. The second indicator that Lucian is ultimately referring his audience to an "oral, synchronic" Homer is signaled by a paradox. The traditional *mūthos* of Homer's blindness, which Graziosi explores in detail, points to the existence of an oral tradition evolving into a written one. The narrator of Lucian's *fabula* tells us that the end that this "Homer" is not really blind, as the tradition has reputed "him" to be. The biographies claim "he" is blind, which means that "he" could only have "composed in performance," i.e., without the aid of writing. But what we have of his work is written, and requires the authentication of certain lines.

How could a blind poet, the *real, original* Homer, have produced a written poem? This could only have happened under two circumstances: either "he" was accompanied everywhere by a scribe, which is most unlikely,¹² or he had not actually been blind, which would be problematic because he was blind as an etiological *mūthos* initiating Greek *poiēsis* itself. Lucian's tale asks "How is it, then, that this 'Homer' could be present to answer questions about issues of

describe the aspirations of those who have, over the centuries, set themselves the task of preserving the literary Homer. In essence, this is the hidden factor that makes Lucian's literary joke work.

¹² Besides being a logistical nightmare for a wandering figure, dictation doesn't fit if the poems were actually supposed to have been sung *by* Muse *through* the poet, as the iconic *mūthos* went.

written composition such as athetized lines?”

For the community of modern Homer scholars, the answer to this follow-up question would most likely be that at some point after the invention of writing some “Homer” or “Homers” dictated to an amanuensis, which is the technology of dissemination that Milton eventually used. Indeed, the dictation of a text or texts which would gradually tend to become “fixed” forms part of the theories of scholars with views as frequently incompatible as, e.g., those of Nagy, Powell, and Janko. Observe that the *tekhnē* of recording Homer “faithfully” is only an incidental part of the Lucian story. The really interesting issues (for those who believe Lucian, at least) are the (in)authenticity of Homer’s blindness, and how readily the lines actually came to him.

In offering my interpretation of Lucian’s story, I admit that I am swimming against the tide. Most see this Second Sophistic tale purely as a reference to the Alexandrian editing of Homer, with no vestige of the oral phases of Homeric transmission. As an example of the majority perspective, I offer personal communications sent to me by Michael Haslam, Emeritus Professor of Classics (papyrology) at U.C.L.A. and a contributor to *A Companion to Ancient Epic*. I select the following remarks, which were conveyed via e-mail:

To me the whole passage seems to take for granted that Homer wrote the poems. Did he (rather than someone else) write the athetized lines? Did he write the *Odyssey* before the *Iliad* (or vice versa)? There is no stress in Lucian on the writing, it’s simply

presupposed. There's no hint of any shift (gradual or otherwise) from an oral tradition. Lucian is debunking Alexandrian scholarship on the Homeric text, and he no less than the Alexandrians assume that Homer wrote. There's no oral tradition anywhere in sight.

Professor Haslam is right that Lucian finds a way to reify "Homer" as a sighted textual editor; but the *poiētes*, "the maker," is seldom the editor. Bear in mind that Lucian intends the story to be enjoyed as an ironic *fiction*. Hence I interpret it, quite against Professor Haslam's objections, as at root a denial that the Alexandrian *diorthōsis* could ever be considered truly "authentic," because I believe that Lucian is assuming that a *real* blind, illiterate singer must have served as the Archaic model for this covertly sighted Alexandrian parody of the iconic *poiētēs*. As evidence, there is Lucian's remark: "I asked why he started with the wrath of Achilles, and he said that it had occurred to him just like this, without any preparation." Plausibly, Lucian is having fun with his audience here by alluding to line ten of the *Odyssey*, Scroll One: "Tell me, as you have told those who came before me, o daughter of Zeus [i.e., Mnēmosúne] starting from whatever point you wish." (Samuel Butler's translation, my emphasis) I find Lucian's Homer's answer markedly *anti*-diorthotic, and hence anti-textual. It is an allusion to the Second Sophistic etiological *mūthos* positing the original existence of a wandering *aidós* spontaneously "recomposing-in-performance" during earlier times. This response ineffably recalls the beautiful passage at *Iliad*, Scroll 2, lines 485-486: "For you (Muses) are goddesses, who are

omnipresent and see everything, while we mortals know nothing except through *kléos*.” This is my own *ad hoc* modification of Samuel Butler’s translation. Butler translates *kléos* here as “report”; another defensible translation, given the context that implies a second-hand communication, is “rumor.” The conventional translation is “glory, fame.” But in the present context it is especially important to give *kléos* Nagy’s etymological rendering: “that which is heard.” As he explains, “‘that which is heard,’ *kléos*, comes to mean ‘glory’ because it is the poet himself who uses the word to designate what he hears from the Muses and what he recites to the audience.”¹³ This interpretation also emphasizes that the poet is composing without the aid of writing—spontaneously, “without any preparation”—in the same basic manner as does the modern South Slavic *gúslar*, the “singer of tales,” a figure Milman Parry and Albert Lord made indispensable to the study of Homeric epic. In this connection, I ask my reader to consider the similarity between the iconic characteristics Homer had in antiquity (e.g., “his” blindness and peregrinations, with an enduring controversy over “his” birthplace) and the tendency in South Slavic culture to “mythologize” the *guslar*. In a brief comparative study of the *guslar* and the Homer figure, John Miles Foley summarizes this phenomenon:

¹³ *Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*, revised edition (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 16.

[T]he legendary singer, although represented as a once-living individual by the lesser, real-life bards who follow in his footsteps, is also a way of designating the poetic tradition. By anthropomorphizing tradition, this strategy avoids the impossible choice that modern criticism often imposes between the gifted poet and his inheritance. In the process, the latter-day guslar also creates an empowering lineage for himself, a genealogy that certifies him and his peers just as the poetic tradition certifies and fills out any given performance of an epic narrative.¹⁴

Foley stresses the following characteristics for both the Homeric and South Slavic traditions:

[T]his legendary singer is an anthropomorphization of what we name by the abstraction "tradition," a representational strategy that allows guslari to talk about what they and their peers jointly inherited and continued to practice. For such a purpose, the apparent conflict between reality and legend actually proves functional in that it images the dyad of individual and tradition by portraying the collective inheritance as an ancestral master bard whom in most cases they never met [my emphasis]. This strategy places the legendary singer just [?!] beyond the reach of historical and geographical fact in a liminal area comfortably unconstrained by the quotidian limits of time and place that define each actual guslar and his activities. Just as every performance draws meaning from the larger poetic tradition that it necessarily implies, so each individual singer legitimates himself by claiming professional descent from the great bard. Both performance and singer become instances of tradition. (pp. 152-3)

Foley mentions in particular three legendary *gúslari* as exhibiting these characteristics (or should one say "criteria?"): Isak, Hasan Coso, and Ćor Huso

¹⁴ "Individual Poet and Epic Tradition: Homer as Legendary Singer," *Arethusa*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1998), pp. 149-178; p. 149.

Husović, all of whom were legendary in the sense that there was considerable dispute among the twenty-seven *guslari* Parry and Lord interviewed on matters of biography and geography. He relates this account of Ćor Huso:

Born blind in the Kolasin region sometime in the first half of the nineteenth century, Ćor Huso Husović was later to become the most famous guslar in all of Montenegro and Serbia. Notwithstanding the obscurity of his early years and the severity of his handicap, he was eventually to enjoy an enormous reputation as an itinerant guslar who surpassed all others and was the source of their best songs. In addition to his wanderings throughout Montenegro and Serbia, he spent 19 years in various parts of Bosnia, where he reportedly traveled in the never-realized hope that his vision would be restored. The sources agree that Ćor Huso journeyed everywhere on horseback, fully armed and accompanied by a young guide. His appearance would have been arresting: he wore a red silk coat with sleeves embroidered in the Croatian style, green trousers, black leather boots, a fez, and a great turban, not to mention a long knife hanging from his belt along with two sterling silver pistols. Very tall and stocky, at minimum 120 kg. (more than 260 lb.), with "brimming handfuls" of mustaches, Ćor Huso was literally larger than life, a challenging burden for even the strongest mount, we are told. Curiously, this vivid representation--strictly speaking, more heroic than bardic--conspicuously lacked his own gusle; he simply used whatever instrument was available, and prospective audiences were only too ready to provide whatever was needed to induce him to perform. We begin to gain a sense of Ćor Huso's legendary status in the reports' vagueness on certain basic facts--precise age, nature of repertoire, training as a singer, and so forth--and also by the ethnographer Schmaus' crestfallen admission that it proved impossible to pin down such details with any accuracy. (p. 162)

Note that this figure has all the basic characteristics of the icon that Graziosi identifies with Lucian's Second Sophistic Homer: his blindness, of course, but also his peripatetic ways, uncertain dates and vague identity. Lest, however, one is

tempted to think of Ćor Huso as the ultimate paradigmatic master bard, the antecedent of the South Slavic *guslari*, I add that there is *another* legendary figure who appeared significantly earlier than Ćor Huso: Filip Vižnjić, who arguably has a greater claim to historicity than Huso, since he has been assigned specific dates (1767-1834). And, on the same principle, Vižnjić himself was the apprentice of a master *gúslar*, and so on and so forth into the “dark backward an abyss of time.” Moreover, Vižnjić’s *fluorit* was supposed to have come during Serbian revolution against the Ottoman Turks (ca. 1804-1813), which lends him an affinity with the Alexandrian scholar Eratosthenes’ image of Homer composing the *Iliad* shortly after the Trojan War—mythically, in 1183-4 B.C.E. And as long as we are searching for an original oral-epic “master poet,” Viznjic has an obvious South Slavic prototype, for he is known as the “Serbian Homer.” This phrase represents Homer as a template for the “oral-poetic possible.”

Foley, an authority on the Greek, South Slavic, and Anglo-Saxon oral traditions, is not so “blinded,” so to speak, by the priority and ubiquity of ancient nonliterate poetic traditions as to ignore the main problem facing scholars of most such traditions, which is that they “survive” only in written form. In other words, ancient epics have ceased to be sung except as displays of “the possible.” What we “have” of them usually amounts to a set of texts. Obviously, the natural “authoritativeness” of a text (cf. Derrida’s confidence in the preservation

of cultural memory through writing) immediately encroaches on the natural fluidity of an oral tradition. Early in his 1999 book *Homer's Traditional Art*, Foley concedes the point:

The contradiction in terms—a textually conceived and defined orality—exposes a . . . shortcoming of the early Parry-Lord theory, or “strong thesis.” At the heart of this approach from the beginning had lain the untested assumption that “oral” could always and everywhere be distinguished from “written,” that the two modes were typologically opposite, mutually exclusive. Given this assumption, the scholarly task simply amounted to sorting out ancient and medieval texts [cf. the Alexandrian *diorthōsis*], which of course could be known only via the manuscripts that survive, into one of the two available categories. The hypothesis of a traditional text, situated midway between the two perceived poles, was therefore unacceptable: if there were no real difference in kind between and among documents, then the hard-won explanations of composition-in-performance and of the role of constituent building blocks would founder. Assimilation to the conventional literary model would be only too ready, especially given the pressure applied by scholars who felt that the Oral Theory sacrificed Homer’s art on the altar of tectonics and mechanism.¹⁵

Clearly, Foley is aware of the dilemma that the necessity Homeric texts pose for those engaged in developing oral-evolutionary models.

But Foley is optimistic; he has recently been claiming to have detected a *détente* between groups he calls “the oralists” and “the scripsists.” The disagreement itself he has referred to as the “Great Divide.” This terminology

¹⁵ John Miles Foley, *Homer's Traditional Art* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1999), p. 16.

has won a reasonably prominent place in current explorations of The Homeric Question. For example, in his 2008 review of Adrian Kelly's *A Referential Commentary and Lexicon to Homer, Iliad VIII*, Christos Tsagalis remarks, "Nagy has not argued that every single *varia lectio* is the result of oral transmission, since post-Aristarchan *variae lectiones* belong to the last phase in Nagy's evolutionary model . . ." ¹⁶ Tsagalis' contentment was actually spawned by an attitude he expresses at the top of his review:

The *Great Divide* between the oralists and scripsists is becoming increasingly outmoded, since both approaches to the riddling conundrum of Homeric poetry have started being more tolerant to the *other side* of Homeric criticism. This is not to say, that there is a general consensus regarding the question of oral traditional poetry versus the poetic genius of a monumental composer, but it is fair to say that, with the exception of a few extremist aficionados, hard-core oralists or scripsists are happily dwindling in number. (ibid.)

The unacknowledged source of Tsagalis' diction, "Great Divide," as well as his critical perspective, could possibly be Foley, who has proclaimed that "[S]cholars and fieldworkers generally concur that the supposed Great Divide of orality versus literacy does not exist."¹⁷ His motivation for saying this may come from his assertion that, contrary to what one might expect, in epic traditions "the oral" does not usually end when "the written" begins. This view is not consistent with

¹⁶ *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2008.01.25, electronic version.

¹⁷ *Homer's Traditional Art* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p. xiii.

observations Albert Lord made about South Slavic songs that ceased to be sung after they were printed in song-books. Nagy, on the other hand, basically agrees with Foley concerning the paradigmatic hazards that come with applying “the conventional literary model” to Homeric epic. Nagy insists that Homeric song must have remained fluid long after the advent of Homeric “textuality.” (Indeed, this is the basis of his concept of “(re-)composition-in-performance,” which, *nota bene*, is a phrase Foley himself uses above.) For it seems that many prominent Homerists are impatient to “fix the text”—here the *double entente* is irresistible—presumably as a way of explaining both the *literatur’nost’* (the Russian Formalist term meaning “literariness”) of the Homeric epics and their artificial Ionic-Aeolic dialect, which in my view shouldn’t really be called a “dialect” at all, since this aggregation of *sémata* was never actually spoken. Both admiring Homer’s “literariness” and accepting the viability of “his” language fall under the category of seeking a “unified” Homer. I call this phenomenon the “rush to stabilize.” Its purpose is in turn to bury the epics’ actual multiformity, which Lord found such a salient feature of Homeric verse. Meanwhile, I call Foley’s “Great Divide” a manifestation of the “oral versus written dilemma.”

I must disagree strenuously with Kelly, Tsagalis, Foley, *et al.* as cited above concerning their sanguine conviction that the “Great Divide” is somehow disappearing. Unlike Foley, I deny that the two parties are really even interested

in resolving the issue. But more important to my analysis of Vico's ideas concerning Homer is the idea that ambiguity and inconsistency have always been a part of the Homeric legacy. Even those views that assign the most prominent role to oral composition succumb to the inevitable problem that the mere mention of Homer as "text" induces a polarity between "the oral" and "the written" that is counterproductive. One way to characterize Nagy's objection to this "either/or" compression of the long process by which "Homer" evolved from a diachronic oral tradition to a set of pseudo-synchronic (and hence deceptive) texts is that the empirical evidence suggests a somewhat different paradigm. The key element missing from the usual "Boolean" model is a just understanding of the evolutionary dynamic that is present in non-literate traditions of "re-composition-in-performance." Perhaps the most difficult quality to communicate about the "oral performance" of poetry is that it differs from the literary *mímēsis*¹⁸ of performance in being non-utilitarian. Nagy puts it this way:

¹⁸ Throughout this paper I shall consciously be employing an understanding of *mímēsis* favored by Nagy, who has referred us to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Nagy has defined *mímēsis* as

the mental process of identifying the representing "this" with the represented "that": "this is that" (1448b17). Such a mental process, Aristotle goes on to say, is itself a source of pleasure (1448b11-18). This pleasure is not incompatible with an anthropological understanding of ritual.

— "Early Greek views of poets and poetry," in vol. 1 of *The Cambridge Companion to Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989; rpt. 1997), p. 6.

The synchronic analysis of living oral traditions reveals that composition and performance are in varying degrees aspects of one process. *The Homeric text, of and by itself, could never have revealed such a reality* [my emphasis]. The fundamental statement is by Lord: “An oral poem is composed not for but in performance.”¹⁹

Nagy believes that Homeric “textuality” must not be viewed as some metaphorical Golden Bough-style *Rex sacrorum* that instantaneously deleted its rival *tekhnē* altogether and then superseded it, in a common misprision suggestive of Hegelian *Aufhebung*. Nagy qualifies his view of Homeric texts thus:

. . . [One] way to approach the question is to consider the textuality of the Homeric poems. Although I will continue to argue that no writing had been required to bring about this textuality, I propose now to rethink the question in terms of a later era when written texts were indeed the norm. Even in this later era, I insist, any written text that derives from an oral tradition can continue to enjoy the status of a recomposition-in-performance—so long as the oral tradition retains its performative authority. In such a later era, where written text and oral tradition coexist, the idea of a written text can even become a primary metaphor for the authority of recomposition-in-performance. (*HQ*, pp. 69-70)

Nagy’s term “primary metaphor” opens the way for me to explicate the affinities I see between his model and Vico’s critique of Homer-images that prevailed in his own day (see below). In spite of these similarities, Vico’s vision ultimately remains limited by the “oral versus written” dichotomy, which is so seductive because it is a convenient explanation for a crucial aspect of western Europe’s

¹⁹ *Homeric Questions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), pp. 17-18.

evolution from “pagan” barbarity to “Christian” civility, a process that is both hard to quantify and subject to constant re-evaluation. To borrow a couple of old terms from historical linguistics, the “syncope” of the Homeric metaphor is myth; the apocope of the evolutionary model constitutes science. I repeat that in the *Scienza Nuova*, Vico devotes most of Book III to a diachronic, “proto-evolutionary” set of illiterate *rapsòdi* who serve as conceptual foils to “Homer” the historical *auctoritas* one finds elsewhere in the work. For Vico these *rapsòdi* are not hypothetical; if they were, they would violate Vico’s first principle in the *Scienza Nuova* of rejecting Cartesian *a priori* epistemology.

As I have studied contemporary theories which seem inextricably ensnared in the “oral-versus-written” dilemma, I have come to the conclusion that, as the Peter Allen song goes, “everything old is new again.” In the spirit of Vergil when he supplicates the Muse Calliope in the Proem to the *Aeneid* with “mihi causas memora” (“bring the causes to my mind”), I have found myself asking how perspectives on Homer came to this pretty pass of engendering a scholarly rush toward establishing *auctoritas-qua*-“text.” For it appears to me that today most Homer scholars lean in the opposite direction from Nagy. His critics have tended to be skeptical of his position on performance because they find it hard to conceive of a scenario in which epic poetry could have been transmitted for generations without the *aide de mémoire* of a written record. In

an assessment of Nagy's *Poetry as Performance* (1996) for *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (97.3.21), Powell dismisses Nagy's position:

Does N[agy] . . . think that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were sung by Homer, not taken down in writing, then sung by a successor nearly verbatim (except for such minor variations as *poludeukea/poluekhea*), still not written down, then sung by someone else, with still more *mouvance* and a shifting of lines here and there, new particles creep in, then in the sixth century BC sort of written down, and then in the fifth century BC really written down, but still with *mouvance* going on, until the Alexandrians at last established our text? Yes, N. does believe this.

Powell's tone reflects his own insistence that for the purpose of transmission the poems were put in writing through dictation. He also claims that

despite N's repeated claims to work within traditions of the Parry-Lord theory of oral composition, he denies the theory of the dictated text, a keystone in the Parry-Lord model, and he fatally denies an essential difference between the singer who composed in performance (the *aoidós*) and the reciter (the *rhapsoidós*), who memorized a written text for public reperformance. (Ibid.)

Elsewhere, Powell theorizes that *one* person from Lefkandi in Euboeia, whom he dubs "the Adapter," reworked the West Semitic sign-system (for he insists this was not technically an alphabet) into the Greek alphabet in the eighth or ninth century for the express purpose of "writing down" the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Of all contemporary theorists concerned with Homeric transmission, Powell arguably exhibits the greatest anxiety to bring a halt, as it were, to the oral-evolutionary process. To demonstrate this, I digress to examine some ideas from his 1993 article "Did Homer Sing at Lefkandi?" Powell adopts a contrarian model

featuring early synchronization in an unexpected dialect:

Even if Homer were Ionian by birth, as tradition maintained, linguistic evidence suggests that his epic dialect may not be East Ionic at all - against *communis opinio* - but Central or West Ionic. This, at least, M. L. West has argued recently, . . . citing as evidence the treatment of original labiovelar in *pou, pos, pote, poios,* etc., which in East Ionic gives *k* instead of *p*, and the occasional absence of compensatory lengthening following the loss of postconsonantal wau (e.g. *enate* for *einate*). . . . P. Wathelet concludes that the latter feature is, in fact, Euboian. . . . 'Attic' correption, i.e. the treatment of a syllable as short before plosive + liquid (e.g. the final syllable of *pteroenta* in *epea pteroenta proseuda*), also seems characteristic of West rather than East Ionic. Taken together, these linguistic features 'point in the direction of Euboea as the area in which the epic language acquired its definitive and normative form. I know of no counter-indications that would favour Asia Minor', according to West. . . .²⁰

Notice Powell's rhetorical sleight-of-hand here. He begins by presenting the traditional ancient image of one single sublime genius "Homer" *as if it were universally considered a viable construct*, against which he will be offering his counter-paradigm. I submit that Vico's *Doppel-Homer*, the one he uses to establish historical credibility, lurks darkly within Powell's phrase. Whatever the case, in certifying *a priori* the synchronic Homer figure (while at the same time attempting to reinforce the reader's confidence in his own *auctoritas* by enlisting M.L. West in his cause), Powell sets the stage for his own theory of the non-

²⁰ *Electronic Antiquity: Communicating the Classics* (July 1993, Volume I, Number 2).

Ionic-Aeolic element of Homeric *epōs*, as well as that of the remarkably early West Greek adaptation of a foreign *tekhnē*.

In positing a different geographical provenance for Homeric Greek, Powell wages his polemic countering the generally held core assumption that Homeric *epōs* was Panhellenic. I say “polemic” because it seems that he is “at war with” any model which emphasizes exploring the polysemous origins of “Homer.” His linguistic analysis allows him to make a logical transition to furthering the theory he is really interested in, that being the need the “culturally superior” Euboeans may have felt for developing a way to “fix” *epōs*. This interpretation explains Powell’s next focus:

Central to the Homeric Question, and to the present topic, is the relation between Homer and writing. We are in a better position now than ever before to understand this problem. . . . Some basics: (a) The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are oral compositions, sung by an accomplished bard, the inheritor of an old tradition of oral verse-making. (b) The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* come down to us because someone wrote them down; they cannot have been passed on orally in the form in which we have them because oral poems are subject to variation and recreation at each performance. (c) It is hardly likely that the bard himself wrote down these poems, since *oidoi* have no need of writing. . . . Whoever wrote down the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* made use of an invention, the Greek alphabet, a new kind of writing capable of recording the phonetic nuances essential to reconstruct the rough form of oral verse from graphic markings. I have argued elsewhere the alphabet was invented expressly for the purpose of recording Homer's poetry.

Recording the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* required a new technology. Present archaeological evidence indicates that the Euboeians were the first to have this technology, which is plausible considering their presence from the early Iron Age in the Levant.

(26) From Lefkandi, in addition to abundant gold, ivory, and faience objects from the eastern Mediterranean, come the very earliest Greek inscriptions, dated by stratification to as early as about 775-750. . . . Other very early Greek alphabetic inscriptions are found in the West, where Chalkis apparently joined with Eretria in friendly times to found the colony on Pithekoussai. The cemetery in the Valle San Montano on Pithekoussai, where much pottery was found, has produced eighth century inscriptions, including the three lines, with two hexameters, on the celebrated 'Cup of Nestor', about 730, together with objects imported from north Syria (Al Mina?), from Phoenicia, and from Egypt. Settlers from Pithekoussai, together with new arrivals from Euboia and Boiotia, soon settled Cumae on the Italic mainland across the bay, an outpost that must have included settlers from a Euboian Kyme or some Aiolic Kymaians who gave the name of their mother city to the Italian colony. . . . From Italian Cumae the Etruscans took their writing about 700, which, transmitted by Rome, is our own. . . . Khalkidic inscriptions from the eighth century also appear on Boiotian bronze cauldrons dedicated on the Acropolis at Athens. . . .

A pattern underlies the data. The Euboians traded in Al Mina in the Levant where they could easily have seen the Phoenician writing on which a Greek inventor based the Greek alphabet; Euboian Lefkandi yields our earliest evidence of Greek alphabetic writing; Euboians founded Pithekoussai in the eighth century, where other early remnants of alphabetic writing have been discovered; from Pithekoussai the Euboic alphabet soon spread to the mainland. A report in Herodotus (5.57-58) supports the epigraphic and archaeological evidence connecting Euboians and early alphabetic literacy:

“the Gephyraian clan, whence came the slayers of Hipparkhos, came first, according to its own traditions, from Eretria; but according to my own inquiries, they belonged to the Phoenicians who came with Kadmos . . . [who] brought into Hellas letters, which had previously been unknown . . . The Euboians first of all the Greeks possessed the technical means to write down, and preserve, Homer's oral verse.”

Everything regarding Powell's hostility to oral-evolutionary paradigms is

displayed in these paragraphs. If we stop at his sentence marked (a), he is in basic agreement with Nagy. But this is where the concord ends. Powell immediately posits the need for a means of arresting the *évolution créatrice*—to appropriate Henri Bergson’s phrase to our subject—in order to record a “proto-text.” Powell’s model gives the impression that the “classic” status of what we know today as the (synchronic) *Iliad* and *Odyssey* was determined practically right away, implying that by the same token the other poems in the Epic Cycle immediately assumed the vestigial, supplementary literary role they now have without ever having undergone their own separate Panhellenic oral evolutions. (This, by the way, is the basic impression “world literature” courses that make Homer the *primum mobile* of the “Western Canon” tend to leave, despite background lectures on Wolf, Parry-Lord, the archeology at Hissarlik, etc.) By contrast, much of Nagy’s most recent work seeks to account for this separation between epic and epitome on the basis of political circumstances that developed somewhat later than Powell’s hypothesis, and at Athens and Alexandria rather than Lefkandi.

Powell’s quasi-Derridean “writerly” vision of Homeric epic (see below regarding Derrida, Bloom, memory, and “the scene of writing”) requires us to extrapolate that arresting “(re-)composition-in-performance” to record the cultural memory entails a highly specialized technology; as it happens, the

archaeological evidence shows that the ancient *West-Greek-speaking* Euboeans were particularly cosmopolitan owing to several foreign influences simultaneously. Therefore, it makes perfect sense to him that the West Greeks should have “adapted” the Phoenician writing system for the express purpose of recording the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Rather unexpectedly, Powell feels free to use as his *ad hoc auctoritas* Herodotus, who validates historically the transmission of writing technology from the Semitic writing system of the Phoenicians to the West Greeks via the “hero” Kadmos.

As I have said, in certain respects Powell’s Homer resembles Vico’s. Powell’s quotation from Herodotus is just the sort of “authoritative” evidence from the Classical corpus that appeals to Vico in his role as Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Naples. Another similarity is that Vico routinely employs mythic figures as if they provided empirical evidence from history. Like Powell, while Vico reveals in Book III, “della Discoverta del vero Omero” that Homer’s epic was originally sung, other aspects of his theory stress that we only have a record of Homer’s “genius” because of writing. In “Idea of the Work,” he first expresses this idea rather indirectly, as *ékphrasis* of the tablet Providence is holding in the *dipintura*:

§23. The tablet shows only the first letters of the alphabets and lies facing the statue of Homer. For the letters, as Greek tradition tells us of Greek letters, were not all invented at one time; at least they cannot all have been invented by Homer's time, for we know that he

left none of his poems in writing.

It occurs to me that one might best think of this particular bit of *ékphrasis* as a kind of draft statement anticipating a later position, because it is actually quite different from his positing multiple Homeric *rapsòdi* in Book III at §877: “[E]ach of them was called *homeros*, had exceptionally retentive memories, and, being poor, sustained life by singing the poems of Homer throughout the cities of Greece.” At both *loci* Vico sounds more like Nagy (and, as it happens, Lucian) than Powell, for Vico’s idealization is not of a literate bard. Still, in §23 Vico is clearly moving in the same direction as Powell’s hypothesis that writing must have been developed for the sole purpose of preserving the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Powell’s criticism of Nagy’s model demands a response. Simply put, Powell’s candid dislike of Nagy’s oral performative model dooms his own West Greek literate Adapter paradigm. I begin by repeating Powell’s rhetorical question from the *BMCR* critique:

Does N[agy] . . . think that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were sung by Homer, not taken down in writing, then sung by a successor nearly verbatim (except for such minor variations as *poludeukea/poluekhea*), still not written down, then sung by someone else, with still more *mouvance* and a shifting of lines here and there . . . ?

Powell is obviously making an appeal to his “clued-in” audience to share his *gnōsis* that Nagy’s position is technically ludicrous; by implication, the train of events that Powell compresses is *prima facie* impossible. Yet in fact, his facetious

digest of Nagy's model, if stripped of its tone, might be considered a decent little provisional abstract, since it encompasses a Panhellenic oral diachrony that rewards creative change. Powell's problem is that he is intellectually hamstrung by his posited "Adapter." It is evident that he truly believes that the transmission over centuries of epic (in the sense of "long") segments of poetry without the aid of alphabets is the stuff of anthropological fantasy.

Nagy does not, as Powell claims, "fatally deny an essential difference between the singer who composed in performance (the *aoidós*) and the reciter who has memorized (the *rhapsoidós*"); he merely attempts to give the two modes a more sensitive diachronic nuance than other contemporary Homer models reflect. Moreover, Nagy's Period 4 (see below) actually *does* suggest something like "a dictated text" in the with the phrase "transcripts or even *scripts*." In a clarification, Nagy has said:

My own evolutionary theory is not at odds with dictation models per se. I need to stress that I oppose not the idea of dictation but the application of this idea to various . . . [competing oral-evolutionary models].²¹

Nagy resists introducing writing too early into the model because he posits a bardic tradition disseminated throughout Greece that remained "fluid" for a very long time. Quite ironically, Powell's proposition that one "Adapter" designed

²¹ *Homeric Responses* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 5.

with wondrous acumen a medium that immediately disposed of the need for Mnēmosúnē (mythologized Hellenic oral memory) seems far more improbable than Nagy's model, which reflects this empirical statement Albert B. Lord made in the course of comparing South Slavic singers with Homeric ones: "when writing is introduced and begins to be used for the same purposes as the oral narrative song, . . . the older art gradually disappears."²² One is obliged to add that Lord's final version of this cause-and-effect paradigm modifies that earlier observation:

Literacy carries the seeds of the eventual demise of oral traditional composition. . . . It is not, however, writing per se that brings about the change; traditional oral epic flourished in the Slavic Balkans for centuries in communities where significant portions of the population were literate. But gradually the epic came to be written down, and the concept of a fixed text, and of the text, of a song came to be current. With that concept arose the need for memorization rather than recomposition as a means of transmission.²³

Lord's reconsideration on this point between 1960 and 1995 is the at the heart of Nagy's scholarly emphasis—up till recently, at least—on the original Archaic creative fluidity of oral epic performance over the eventual Classical and Hellenistic motif of seeking to politicize Homer by generating *koinē* (meaning

²² *Singer of Tales*, p. 20.

²³ A. B. Lord, ed. M. L. Lord, *The Singer Resumes the Tale* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995), p. 102.

both “common” and “standard”) versions. That Nagy’s scholarly production has currently shifted toward “the written” should *debellare* critics like Powell. From the perspective of my comparative study Nagy’s most important “first principle” is that the gradual fixation of an epic tradition conceals its history from us. This theme of the unrecognized concealment of process and the consequent need for scientific revelation is at the heart of Vico’s system, as well.

Anxiety to establish a synchronic “master document,” a comforting *auctoritas* represented by a Homeric “text,” is not limited to Powell. As evidence, I cite Nagy’s response to Martin L. West’s 1998-99 edition of the *Iliad*. In the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2000.09.12, Nagy writes:

Martin West . . . argues that Homer did not exist (West 1999b). In denying the existence of a Homer, West is not arguing that Homer the poet is a mythical construct (as I have argued in N 1996b.111-112). For West, only the name of Homer is mythical (again, West 1999b). The *Praefatio* of West’s edition makes it explicit that the poet of the *Iliad* was not a mythical but a real historical figure, even if we do not know his name; this poet was the “*primus poeta*,” and he was “*maximus*” (p. v).

Nagy expands upon this view of West’s approach in *Homer’s Text and Language* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005). He begins by noting West’s oddly categorical insistence on making an editorial choice that is completely inimical to the principle of fluidity in epic: “We have to choose one version that we are aiming to establish, and clearly it should be the poet’s last

version.”²⁴ West’s confidence not only reminds us of Lucian’s Homeric satire, it also recalls the unending issue editors of modern texts face when preparing an author’s work for the public: is it truly just to consider the last form a work takes to be definitive, or does it better serve an author’s memory to record discrepancies among drafts and “corrected” versions that might reflect earlier states of a text in order to reveal interesting aspects of the creative process? (As a case in point, I cite the works of Henry James.) Some editors prefer the former approach, while others prefer the latter.

Obviously, West finds himself in the first camp. His insistence on giving readers of the “edited text” an illusion of synchrony, and thus of “authorship,” is what drives Nagy’s criticism of his *Iliad*. Part of the issue revolves around West’s “original position” (if I may borrow a phrase from John Rawles) that the “author” of most of what we have as the *Iliad* was a poet whose name really was “Homer.” In *Homer’s Text and Language*, Nagy writes:

²⁴ West 2000b, pp. 158-159. West’s response to Nagy’s patent criticism of his view that Homer must have been both “real” and “literate” seems to appropriate, with the finest Kierkegaardian irony, the *auctoritas* of an element of the Parry-Lord Hypothesis itself. In the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2001.09.06, West writes:

As Adam Parry pointed out, if the poet had not written (or caused to be written), we could not have his poem. But we do have it, because "he" is by definition the author of the poem we have.

The catch is that, as I document below (ca. p. 94), Nagy does not necessarily view Adam Parry as a trustworthy explicator of the Parry-Lord “project.”

[T]he study of living oral poetic traditions shows that different available versions cannot be reduced to a single basic version from which all versions are to be derived. For West's editorial method to succeed, it must be assumed, as a starting point, that the *Iliad* is not a matter of oral poetry.

Whether or not it is true that the *Iliad* is oral poetry, one thing is for sure: West has simply bypassed the available comparative evidence provided by the study of oral poetics. . . . So long as oral poetry persists in a given literate society, each written instance of a "version" will be different from each succeeding instance—even in conditions where the audience at large assumes that each new instance is simply a repetition of previous instances. . . .

What Nagy says West is seeking is a recension tree branching out from one "*ur-performance*" that just happens to have been recorded. The problem with West's approach that stares us right in the face is that it is too redolent of Random House; it tends to accord priority to the textual editor over the skills of the ethnographer. It fails to differentiate between "Homer" as a diachronic set of manifestations, both oral and literate, of a tradition, and the necessary eventual desire to establish an "optimal" literary version derived from that tradition. In a sense, West's perspective does even more damage to the concept of oral-evolutionary fluidity than Powell's does, since it is so intent on positing a "one and only" poet called Homer.

This dilemma existed even in antiquity, as part of what I shall be calling the "Greco-Roman continuum." Hence, for example, there is an affinity between Lucian's fanciful encounter with the poet and Horace's labels for narrative strategies in the *Ars Poetica*, namely "ab ovo" and "in medias res":

nec gemino bellum Troianum orditur ab ovo;
semper ad eventum festinat et in medias res

(ll. 147-148)

neither, I add, is the warp laid out [orditur] for the Trojan war from [Leda's] egg;
it is always rushing toward the [next] event, right into the middle of things

(my translation)

In the first line, Horace is describing the *Iliad* as a text, as signaled by the verb *orditur* ("is woven, unravels, begins"), which is a time-honored metaphor, i.e., the "thread" of narrative. Meanwhile, line 148 fortuitously applies just as well to the performances of the *gúslari* as recorded in the Milman Parry Collection at Harvard: they are so rapid and sound so effortless that in re-composing during a performance, it seems that the *guslar* "semper ad eventum festinat" ("is always rushing toward the event").

In any case, Homer's response to Lucian's question is that, as the most sublime of poets, who received inspiration directly from the Muse without an intervening sign-system, he was unburdened by the premeditative constraints of ordinary "literary" poets. W.B. Yeats incidentally alludes to this power as attributed to "Homer" when he writes this of his own work:

. . . A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

—from “Adam’s Curse” (1904)

Here, Yeats captures the essence of the Homeric dilemma: the *guslar’s* institutional *érgon* (work, function) is to appear “spontaneous,” which is a mechanistic expression of the traditional *mūthos* of vatic inspiration.

One of Graziosi’s purposes in *Inventing Homer* is to attempt to establish approximately when the iconic literary image of Homer became stabilized. And I think her analysis has other fascinating implications. For me, what stands out in Lucian’s little quasi-Odysean fiction is the stupendous ruse he exposes concerning the “spontaneity” of this fellow Homer’s *poiēsis*. Revealing at the end of his story that the Homer of *kléos* is actually *not* blind is emblematic of a skepticism regarding the very feasibility of performing oral poetry inspired by the Muses. The inconsistency of the ancient iconography of Homer supports this interpretation. As Graziosi observes:

The visual evidence allows us to draw two separate conclusions. The first is that blindness was a sort of signature which immediately clarified Homer’s identity to viewers. If we consider that the name *Homeros* was sometimes thought to mean “blind,” the identification of blindness as a marker of identity becomes all the more compelling. Secondly, the evidence shows that Homer was not always depicted as being blind. There are, in other words, limits to the universality of blindness as a feature of his portraits. This is in itself not surprising, given the general flexibility of ancient representations of Homer; but it is worth exploring when and why Homer’s eyes were depicted as normal.

The earliest example of Homer with normal eyes is a portrait found on some coins from Ios, usually dated from the second half of the fourth century BC. They portray Homer in profile with wide-

open eyes and clearly-distinguishable pupils. . . [W]hatever their “iconographical value,” the coins from Ios show that Homer did not necessarily have to be portrayed as being blind, at least on coins . . .

[I]t should be noted that from the Hellenistic period onwards, we begin to get images of Homer holding a scroll. This type of portrait can be found both in stone and on coins. Though it is not always possible to observe his eyes closely—particularly in the coin portraits—we may assume that Homer is holding a scroll because he has written, or is in the process of reading, his poems. (pp. 129-130)

The iconographic shift reflects a shift in *tekhnē*, culturally transmitted art, from diachronic memory expressed as “(re-)composition-in-performance” to the synchronic preservation through writing of one perceived individual unparalleled genius’ “works.” With this shift came the ascendancy of editors, commentators, translators, and historians relating to Homer as “text.”

A similar instability applies to the matter of Homer’s financial condition, or “class.” Graziosi observes:

Most classicists seem unaware that in antiquity Homer was consistently represented as poor, and rather assume that he belonged to, or at least was closely associated with, the aristocracy. Scholars tend to posit a very close connection between the world depicted in the Homeric poems and that inhabited by Homer. [Joachim] Latacz is one of the few scholars who states these assumptions explicitly. In his essay on Homer for *Der Neue Pauly* he claims that Homer was a singer much like Achilles in *Iliad* 9.186-91, and that he belonged to the nobility and was at the very least closely associated with it. Latacz is aware that ancient audiences did not think that Homer in any way resembled Achilles, but he tries to dismiss their point of view: “The image of the poets sketched in the *Lives* has hardly anything in common with the one that confronts us in the epics. The Homer of this legend is a blind, begging singer who hangs around with little people: shoemakers,

fishermen, potters, sailors, elderly men in the gathering places of harbor towns.” . . . [*Homer: His Art and His World*, tr. James P. Holoka (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 29] (ibid., p. 134)

Graziosi’s scholarship allows me to assert that there are templates in Vico’s anthropology which he “discovered” (a diction that gets to the very heart of his thought) among the ancient Greek and Roman texts. This is supremely evident in a passage from his *Scienza nuova* that I have already cited which critics probably quote most often to demonstrate his anticipation of current Homeric paradigms:

§877 E la cecità . . . §878 e la povertà d’Omero furono de’ rapsòdi, i quali, essendo ciechi, onde ogniun di loro si disse «omèro», prevalevano nella memoria, ed essendo poveri, ne sostentavano la vita con andar cantando i poemi d’Omero per le città della Grecia, de’ quali essi eran autori, perch’erano parte di que’ popoli che vi avevano composte le loro istorie.

§877. And the blindness . . . §878 and the poverty of Homer were characteristics of the rhapsodes, who, being blind, whence each of them was called *homeros*, had exceptionally retentive memories, and, being poor, sustained life by singing the poems of Homer throughout the cities of Greece; and they were the authors of these poems inasmuch as they were a part of these peoples who had composed their histories in the poems.

This portrait of Homer the blind, impoverished archetype (Vico’s word is *carattere*; see below for a discussion) constitutes a treatment of literature and history as if they were empirical evidence, which epitomizes his method. If we relate this image back to Graziosi’s ambivalent Homeric icon of late antiquity—a

reputedly blind poet who “in truth” can see; a renowned oral poet holding a scroll; a court poet singing for his supper in “harbor towns”—then this Homer owes as much to Vico’s knowledge of the Classical corpus as to any “scientific” recognition of Homeric “multeity-in-unity,” as Coleridge would doubtless have enjoyed calling it. Take note that here in §877-§878 Vico has done more than simply appropriating Homer’s blindness and poverty from one “wing,” as it were, of the tradition. He has put something over on his readers: he has essentially “cloned” the archetype of which Lucian makes such fun and sent all the progeny out into preliterate Greece (again, note that Vico does not mention Asia Minor) as a group—or perhaps a succession—of “real” artists devoted to disseminating, preserving—one might even say *forming*—Panhellenic culture. I use “real” emphatically because (following no less a luminary than Benedetto Croce) I believe that Vico conceives the so-called “Rinaldi” singers of his native Naples as empirical evidence, much as Graziosi herself, in characterizing present models, considers the appropriateness of studying the South Slavic *guslars* in order to understand the ancient Homeric icon (*ibid.*, pp. 136-137). This *mīmēsis* (Aristotle) or appropriation (Kierkegaard) of the Classical and especially the post-Classical Homeric image to “certify” flesh-and-bone singers epitomizes my subject, since it reflects the ambiguity with which Vico treats Homer, manifested most prominently between Books II and III of the *Scienza nuova*, but implicit

throughout the work. This ambiguity in Vico's concepts and its manifestations both before and after Vico constitute my main theme.

Vico's rhetorical trick (as I feel it necessary to repeat) of "recruiting" a *literary* "Homer" from the Classical corpus to serve the historical function of the supposedly empirical *carattere* (archetype)²⁵ represented by itinerant singers in archaic Greece has served its purpose even to the present day, for it has fooled even the most sophisticated modern scholars. A case in point is B.A. Haddock, who has assessed Vico's putative innovation as follows:

The dissolution of the historical identity of Homer as the matchless poet of the heroic age had not been premeditated by Vico in the *Scienza Nuova prima* of 1725; this paradox "had not even entered into our reflections when readers of the first edition of this New Science . . . suspected that the Homer believed in up to now was not real." . . . Rather, it was the "metaphysical criticism of the history of the obscurest antiquity, that is, the explanation of the ideas the earliest nations naturally formed" which led Vico to assert "that Homer was an idea or a heroic character

²⁵ To begin to understand this word's full semantic *éclat* and architectonic function in Vico's work, one must consider the definition he gives it in Book II, "Poetic Wisdom," at §429: "'The word 'character' [*carattere*] . . . means idea, form, model, and certainly poetic characters came before those of articulate sounds.'" Here I stress the radical ambivalence in this definition, whose import even the careful reader might underestimate. On the one hand, we see "form, model," which justifies conceiving of *carattere* as a generalized paradigm or archetype. I shall be arguing that this is how Vico usually employs the word. But then he defines "poetic characters" as prevocal *sēmata*. The discomfiting aspect of this latter construct is that it asserts that the written representation of language must have come before articulation. This is a seeming logical *hústeron próteron* which I shall discuss below in connection with the work of Jürgen Trabant.

[archetype!] of Grecian men insofar as they told their histories in song."²⁶

If I had not demonstrated just above that all of the attributes of Vico's iterative and peripatetic "Homers" as described in §877-§878 existed in the Second Sophistic—and even before—as synchronizations of a set of legends about the *character* "Homer," Haddock's phrase "dissolution of the historical identity of Homer" might well describe Vico's Homeric icon quite well. But the ultimate *similarity* between the figure Vico posits in §878 and Lucian's Homer indicates that in reality the embryonic "dissolution" (Haddock's word) though palpable, is at best ambiguous, because the *primary* source of Vico's "metaphysical criticism of the history of the obscurest antiquity" springs, throughout his work, from neither hypothetical prototypes nor contemporary exemplars such as the "Rinaldi" singers, but from his knowledge of Classical and post-Classical texts. It may seem that I am contradicting myself here, since elsewhere I argue that Vico did indeed have a modern empirical paradigm available in the "Rinaldi" singers. But I note that this paradigm is *supplementary*; it does not actually mitigate the primacy of literary models for Vico.

The sign that Vico considered addressing this problematic aspect of "The Homeric Question" important to his general theories first appears

²⁶ "Vico's 'Discovery of the True Homer': A Case-Study in Historical Reconstruction (*Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1979), pp. 583-602) p. 585.

pictorially—i.e., in advance of any argumentation. The 1730 and 1744 versions have a frontispiece, the *dipintura*, which features the statue of a conspicuously blind figure standing on a cracked pedestal labeled “Homer.” In what amounts to an extended *ékphrasis* explaining the statue’s “presence” (cf. Derrida), Vico devotes the entire Book III of the *Scienza Nuova*, “Della scoperta del vero Omero” (“Discovery of the True Homer),” to promoting certain ideas of his own that, he says, diverge at prominent points from the usual assumptions of his day. Throughout Book III, Vico is most congenial with today’s oral-evolutionary perspectives in conceiving of “Homer” to be a metonymic *persona* representing a class of performers functioning in early Hellenic culture over many centuries. The damaged statue is an emblem of Vico’s widely recognized prefiguring of current Homer models; hence it is an ideal *sēma*²⁷ to place at the head of this

²⁷ I shall be using this word from Structuralism and semiotics quite consciously *passim*, mainly because it is apt for describing the iconic aspect of Vico’s rhetorical method, but also because it is Homeric. As Nagy points out, in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* *sēma* commemorates the former mortality of the enshrined cult-hero:

The “marker” of the *sōma* of the cult-hero was the *sēma*, which often took the physical form of a “tomb.” The “marking” of the *sōma* could also be a sign or signal or token or picture; the word for such a marking was also *sēma*.

– “The Epic Hero,” *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, John Miles Foley, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 86.

Vico’s claim in Book III is that the ecphrastic “token marking” of Homer as “he” had been misunderstood before the *Scienza Nuova* constituted the faulty pedestal, as well as the statue itself.

study.

The reader should understand from the start that I see the connection between Vico and the oral-evolutionary Homer model as reflecting an epistemological principle which is represented quite frequently in the history of ideas. It is grounded in an *ontological fluidity* which, for instance, Arthur Schopenhauer describes in Chapter Four of his 1818 *Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*: “[C]hange or alteration is [the] succession of states, and succession is only possible in Time.” In Chapter One of *The World as Will and Representation* (1819), Schopenhauer elaborates on this principle in relation to the individual’s perception of reality. And is clear from his reference in 1819 to Herakleitos’ *panta ’rei, kai ouden menei* (‘Everything is in flux; nothing remains static’), the form which the famous maxim takes in Plato’s *Kratulos*, 402 A, that Schopenhauer considers change-in-Time as not confined to a *particular* Subject.²⁸ The oral-evolutionary Homeric model is predicated upon just this fundamental truth. Schopenhauer’s definition of change, which he also expresses as a constructive flux in the representation of the Subject by succeeding Objects,

²⁸ Even though Schopenhauer mentions Herakleitos in the context of his own ground principle of change-in-Time, in my opinion their concepts differ considerably. Herakleitean “change” is actually eternal flux brought about by the “strife” (*pólemos*, also commonly translated as “warfare”) of opposites. This everlasting conflict in Herakleitos’ cosmology is a manifest precursor of the Hegelian sublative dialectic, which Schopenhauer spent his whole philosophical life grumpily assailing in order to discredit. I strongly assert, therefore, that one must understand Schopenhauer’s “change” not as “flux” back-and-forth, but as eternal movement forward in time.

foreshadows Thomas S. Kuhn's concept of "paradigm shift."

Kuhn's definition of this phrase to describe the driving theoretical mechanism of scientific progress can be summarized as follows: a shift occurs when either the data can no longer be accommodated within the existent paradigm, or the existent paradigm cannot be modified to accommodate them. This way of understanding Kuhn's theory privileges the data over the imagination it takes for theory to shift in the first place. I submit that, with the aid of the humanities, scientific paradigms can also demonstrably shift *in advance* of the data that support the change empirically. Consider, for example, Einstein's "discovery" of time as a fourth dimension. A prior place that idea appears formally is in H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, published in 1895, a decade before the publication of Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity. As the book opens, Wells's nameless protagonist is making a rational scientific argument before his dinner companions:

"Clearly," the Time Traveller proceeded, "any real body must have extension in *four* directions: it must have Length, Breadth, Thickness, and—Duration. But through a natural infirmity of the flesh, which I will explain to you in a moment, we incline to overlook this fact. There are really four dimensions, three which we call the three planes of Space, and a fourth, Time. There is, however, a tendency to draw an unreal distinction between the former three dimensions and the latter, because it happens that our consciousness moves intermittently in one direction along the latter from the beginning to the end of our lives."

Clearly, the paradigm for time as a dimension existed before Einstein's famous

thought experiments, which in turn demanded formal proof as equations. An even more pertinent example is Heinrich Schliemann's fervid conviction that the Trojan War must really have taken place. It was not a case of his having come across artefacts on other projects that shifted the paradigm. Rather, he had the intuition from boyhood that some form of historicity lay behind the Homeric epics. And in spite of Schliemann's notorious ineptitude, misinterpretations, and self-serving underhandedness, gradually the empirical archaeological evidence at Hisarlik in Turkey is, as Vico would doubtless have said, "unearthing the truth," thus vindicating Schliemann's boyhood conviction.

The "chicken-and-egg" relationship between theory and empirical data is an important detail of the proposition Kuhn formulates in his 1962 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that scientific progress occurs not because the accumulation of new data immediately invalidates an old model, but because these data force an alternative *way of thinking* that accommodates them better. In his theory, for a time the old and new paradigms compete with each other, but eventually the new one stands alone, until yet another one that explains still more recent, counter-indicating data comes along to compete with it. Kuhn's theory labels this competitive, unresolved stage (which Hegel would conceivably have called a "meso-thesis") the "pre-paradigm period." His argument proceeds as follows:

After the pre-paradigm period the assimilation of all new theories and of almost all new sorts of phenomena has in fact demanded the destruction of a prior paradigm and a consequent conflict between competing schools of scientific thought. Cumulative acquisition of unanticipated novelties proves to be an almost non-existent exception to the rule of scientific development. The man who takes historic fact seriously must suspect that science does not tend toward the ideal that our image of its cumulativeness has suggested.²⁹

One could justifiably accuse me, at the very ground-level of my argument, of applying an out-of-date, over-worn, and over-generalized technological paradigm to changes in aesthetics. Having anticipated this objection, I observe that Vico's very title *Scienza nuova* announces that he is endeavoring to give a field of study (can one justifiably label it "cultural history"?) that had previously had no real method associated with it an empirical import, as a systematic riposte to Descartes' method of *a priori* reasoning.³⁰ We must accord to Vico the courtesy of accepting his goal of establishing a *scienza nuova* as sincere, even if from a present-day standpoint his limitation of the "data" to mythology, history, and philology automatically mitigates his efforts. On the other hand, Vico is explicitly trying to avoid becoming just another historiographer in the mold of,

²⁹ "The Nature and Necessity of Scientific Revolutions," *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 96.

³⁰ Descartes' confidence in *a priori* reasoning can be seen as applying better to his formal epistemology than to his scientific curiosity. As an example I cite the ingenious experiment in which he placed the lens from a cow's eye over an image, inverting the image, and leading to the mechanistic conclusion that the brain automatically corrects for the inversion.

e.g., Herodotus, Tacitus or Varro, even though these names come up as authorities intended to legitimize for his audience certain aspects of his ground principles, methods, and results.

So, taken as a whole, the *Scienza Nuova* reflects a tension between perspectives that is comparable to the one I have just touched upon between Nagy and his competitors. It is not enough to say that Vico must be congratulated for postulating the kernel of a modern Homer theory. If he is to be given genuine credit for being “ahead of his time,” one must also use the more conventional approach of looking at him in the context of his own time. The most constructive way of assessing Vico’s movement away from the aesthetic *ágon* known in French as *la Querelle des anciens et des modernes* and in English as “Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns” or “The Battle of the Books” (Swift’s title), is to treat that set of controversies as quite similar in some ways to today’s “oral-evolutionary” conundrum.

After mulling over whether it would be honest and fruitful to connect Vico and Nagy, I decided that one could meet these criteria through the “Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns.” I thought about how interesting it could be to elaborate on the “oral versus written” dilemma by investigating whether anyone prior to the likes of Robert Wood and Friedrich August Wolf,

let alone Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord, had any kind of “proto-ethnographic” sense of the primacy, longevity, and distribution of preliterate Homeric epic. Might it be possible, I pondered, to find a way to compare late Neoclassical / early Enlightenment perspectives with both ancient and current ones without inevitably concluding that no resemblance exists among the three? I had seen a permutation of the problem expressed in a chapter-title, “Oral and Written Styles,” in a book by Steven Shankman on Alexander Pope’s Homer translations.³¹ Shankman’s title as a manifestation of John L. Foley’s putative “Great Divide” provides an organizational principle with which to justify such a comparison.

As is frequently true of positing such antipodes, the looming danger here is oversimplification. The truth is that, as *sēmata*, “Ancient” and “Modern” present a rather subtle paradox. From one viewpoint, it makes perfect sense that these labels should have been used to divide, e.g., Sophocles from Racine, as it did for Boileau and his contemporaries. From this perspective, the supporters of the Ancients would naturally be inclined to praise Homeric and Fifth-Century Attic “higher seriousness” (as Matthew Arnold correctly translates Aristotle’s *spoudaióteron* in his 1880 essay “The Study of Poetry”)³² over the

³¹ *Pope’s ‘Iliad’: Homer in the Age of Passion* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1983).

³² Arnold’s familiar praise of Aristotle’s aesthetic judgement quotes from the *Poetics*, 1451b:

Only one thing we may add as to the substance and matter of poetry,

“anti-Aristotelian” tragicomic dialectic *mélange des genres* (Victor Hugo, “Preface”

guiding ourselves by Aristotle’s profound observation that superiority of poetry over history consists in its possessing a higher truth and a higher seriousness (φιλοσοφώτερον και σπουδαιότερον). Let us add, therefore, to what we have said, thus: that the substance and matter of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing, in an eminent degree, truth and seriousness.

Elsewhere in the essay, Arnold wields this “high seriousness principle” to hack the eminently “anti-Victorian” Chaucer down to size:

However we may account for its absence, something is wanting . . . to the poetry of Chaucer, which poetry must have before it can be placed in the glorious class of the best. And there is no doubt what that something is. It is the . . . high and excellent seriousness . . . which Aristotle assigns as one of the grand virtues of poetry. The substance of Chaucer's poetry, his view of things and his criticism of life, has largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benignity; but it has not this high seriousness. Homer's criticism of life has it, Dante's has it, Shakespeare's has it. It is this chiefly which gives to our spirits what they can rest upon; and with the increasing demands of our modern ages upon poetry, this virtue of giving us what we can rest upon will be more and more highly esteemed.

These “quaint and curious” remarks demonstrate why so many of Arnold’s aesthetic *dicta* are generally ridiculed in these Postmodern times. They were the stuff of that heavily marked Victorian critical straw man pseudo-Horatian *decorum*, a figure lacking, among other qualities, an appreciation for the “truth” behind the Romantic *mélange des genres* principle. To exclude Chaucer from the pantheon of the “true” greats because his poetry never reaches the “higher seriousness” of Shakespearean tragedy utterly (dis)misses the crucial humanizing effect of, for example, the *comedy* in the gravedigger scene in *Hamlet*. Consider also the porter in *Macbeth*. And (to stretch the point a bit beyond formal genre) what would the Henry IV plays be without Falstaff, Mistress Quickly, and Bardolph? Indeed, it is fairly clear that Shakespeare’s use of comic relief in his “serious” plays is “present” because they were originally *performed* for the many, though admittedly *read* by the few.

Notice that Arnold’s misprision of Shakespeare’s dramaturgy causes him to make a bad prediction about literature to come when he implies that Chaucer’s wit alone will not support future genius. To meet this assumption on the broadest possible terms, I counter that “giving us what we can rest upon” has involved as much artistic debt to Aristophanes as to Sophocles, if not more.

to *Cromwell*, 1827) characteristic of, say, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831). Yet I contend that there is even sounder justification for reversing the semantic tags “Ancient” and “Modern” that yields a more accurate picture of what was taking place in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century aesthetics. In this construction, “Ancients versus Moderns” divides *the aesthetic critics themselves* between those who conceived “Homer” as a “text” with an “authoritative” source, and those who recognized that the *libros confusos*,³³ the multiplicity of forms and recensions produced over the millennia, cry out for analysis. The process begins from the irony that the very problems exposed by the need to synchronize / individuate “Homer” must lead us back to a time before texts, to a time of “performers.” Let me repeat: it is the very centrality Vico gives in “Della scoperta” to the *necessity* of an original *Panhellenic* performative stage that Gregory Nagy finds “so intuitive.”

Support for this alternative use of “Ancients and Moderns” referring to the critical perspective rather than the author comes from Vico’s slightly elder contemporary Richard Bentley (1662-1742). Joseph M. Levine has written:

Homer continued to interest Bentley and eventually the new Aristarchus (his title to both friends and enemies) began to contemplate an edition of his own. . . Bentley had a radically

³³ This is how Cicero’s characterizes what remained of Homer in the *De oratore* 3.137: “De Oratore 3.137: Pisistrati, qui primus Homeri libros confusos antea sic disposuisse dicitur ut nunc habemus.” I hold that, ironically, the seeds of the present day “oral-evolutionary” model reside in this “lettered” judgment.

different notion of the composition and meaning of the epics, nearer to Perrault and Abbe d'Aubignac than the controversial new Cambridge professor of Greek [Joshua Barnes]. True modern that he was, he did not share the radical idea of Homer that ascribed to him, among other things, the whole basic wisdom of Western civilization.³⁴

The image of Homer as an encyclopedia of Archaic Greek culture was the impression, Bentley thought, left by Barnes' massive and popular two-volume 1711 edition. Barnes had painstakingly annotated manuscripts of Homer which had been purchased in 1629 by the Earl of Pembroke from the Venetian Barrocci and placed in the Bodleian Library (*ibid.*, p.154). The prodigious work Barnes had done was predicated on the assumption that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were synchronic works produced by one supreme authoritative mind. Bentley knew this premise was fundamentally wrong, as Levine points out:

Nor indeed did . . . [Bentley] believe the original work was as we now have it. As early as 1713, he remarked, in the midst of a religious quarrel with Anthony Collins, that the *Iliad* did not display, as his opponent had claimed, "a universal Knowledge of things." (*ibid.*, p. 160)

Never timorous in offering his opinions, Bentley felt that for his mediocre edition, Barnes should have been "turned out of the Chair" of Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge, and that "he deserved to be burnt" (*ibid.*, p. 159). Bentley stands out from among other contemporary emenders because he recognized the

³⁴ Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: Literature and History in the Augustine Age* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 160.

polysemous nature of Homer while at the same time having a superior knowledge of Greek—for his day, at least. Later, Bentley is able to “re-perform” essentially the same charges against Alexander Pope’s 1720 translation of the *Iliad*. Two details of Bentley’s reaction to Pope are especially reminiscent of the Barnes affair. Pope’s *Iliad* was so popular that it sold out in several editions; Bentley said it was “not Homer.” As we shall see, in “della Discoverta” Vico shares Bentley’s aim of discrediting the notion that Homer was a single encyclopedic genius. This suggests that the so-called “Unitarians” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were less auspicious of today’s oral-evolutionary paradigm than were the “Analysts.”

The tendency has been to say that Vico subscribes to my latter interpretation of “Ancients and Moderns.” One way this has been done has been to call him a prophet of “modernity” in the second construction I have presented.³⁵ The crucial difference between them is that while Bentley, as a *bona fide*, if overconfident, Greek scholar, views the extant Homeric texts as the collective *terminus a quo* of a tradition, most of which he understands to be preliterate. Vico, by contrast, starts from what he calls the “mythological” preliterate age, which he reconstructs from other “Classical” texts in addition to

³⁵ See, for example, Robert C. Miner, *Vico’s Genealogy of Modernity* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002). For a challenge to the conception of Vico as a critical “Modern,” see Mark Lilla, *G.B. Vico: The Making of an Anti-Modernist*.

Homer. It is noteworthy that Vico uses these texts (which Descartes has rejected out of hand because he thinks they do not impart actual “knowledge”) in tandem with a similar art-form in modern Italian culture: the “Rinaldi” singers. This is in good measure why categorizing Vico has been so difficult. From the point of view I have just endeavored to outline, he is in some respects an Ancient and in others a Modern. At any rate, the result is that in “Della Discoverta” he assesses the original Homeric bards as a *succession* of wandering *rapsòdi*. In so doing, he happens to be allying himself with textual skeptics like Bentley, though Vico saw himself as being completely original on this point.

But elsewhere in the *Scienza Nuova*, most notably in Book II, entitled “la Sapienza poetica” (“Poetic Wisdom”), Vico takes up the cause of the “Ancients.” Joseph Levine, referring to French and English scholars, happens to explain beautifully in the following passage the *Scienza nuova*’s material framework:

[The Ancients (that is, critics and emenders *favoring* the Ancients)] . . . had been taught to believe in the immediacy [my emphasis] of the ancient authors, in the applicability of ancient poetry to modern life. In this . . . they had been preceded by ancient commentators who had themselves tried to assimilate Homer to their own time and thus already given to the world a “modernized” Homer. So, to an extent, the ancients [sic] deliberately looked past the awkward differences. Where this was hard to do, as with the pagan gods of the two poems, a clever allegorical exegesis could easily explain away or qualify the difficulty. Did not the Bible present many of the same problems? And here their ignorance helped also (their inability as well as their unwillingness to see differences), for the state of Greek learning—even modern Greek philology—was not yet sufficient to come to terms with the world of Homer. (Levine, 1991,

pp. 131-132)

Writing elsewhere about Vico's place within the Quarrel, Levine makes a distinction between its scientific and aesthetic aspects:

It may be useful to begin by distinguishing in the Quarrel two different areas of conflict. In the first place, there was an argument over knowledge that involved, in particular, philosophy and natural science: did the ancients know more than the modems in these matters? In the second place, there was an argument over literature and the arts: had the ancients achieved more than the modems in these fields? For the first, the question involved accumulation; for the second, imitation. The issues in each of these traditional areas of culture were thus different, although related, and it may be helpful to take them separately.³⁶

Concerning Vico, I shall be pleading for a less rigid interpretation. The *Scienza nuova's* structure makes more sense, I believe, if we assume that he intended all along to *amalgamate* science and literature. This interpretation is sensible because Vico felt that Descartes' rejection of literature and history left him, Vico, with an opportunity (indeed, an *obligation*) to fill a vacuum with a science built upon historical excursus. The net effect in the *Scienza Nuova* of Vico's deliberate embrace of a *verum / factum* perspective (see below) which Descartes had derided explicitly—that is, evidence of prior civilizations from the Classical corpus, the Bible, and Egyptian hieroglyphics—is that history, even if it does

³⁶ "Giambattista Vico and the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Jan. - Mar., 1991), pp. 55-79.

come from sources that so often rest upon glorified and biased cultural gossip, can, when properly interpreted, lead us toward a *science* of social development.

This method is all well and good for striving to originate a comprehensive theory of history. But Vico is also trying to accomplish a second feat. In “Della Discoverta” he is also addressing that aspect of the Quarrel that had attracted so many retrograde, mimetic interpretations of Homer as the so-called “Prince of Poets.” I intend to show that the cracked base supporting the Homer statue in the *dipintura* is his *sēma* that interpretations have heretofore been “off-base.” I will be quoting extensive passages from Book III that leave no doubt that he understood the Homeric phenomenon as originally nonliterate, and thus “pre-canonical,” if you will. Again, this image often clashes with the rest of his theory, which depends quite heavily on explicating how Homer’s recorded gods and heroes behaved, and how these *caratteri*, archetypes, influenced the course of European culture.

To continue exploring the *Scienza nuova*’s sublimated yet crucial motif of maintaining equilibrium between the “oral” and the “written,” especially in reference to Homer, I must digress by bringing up Milton’s (second?) Muse in *Paradise Lost*, a figure which is both ambiguous in a most Vichian sense, and only nominally Homeric. I do so to stress that Vico fabricates a comparable

Muse of his own.³⁷ He refers to her alternately as “Providence” and “Metaphysic,” and eventually (in the 1744 edition) introduces with a second temporally marked permutation bearing the pseudo-Classical motto *Ignota Latebat*—“[She] lay about unrecognized [that is, until I, Vico, uncovered her in my *Scienza Nuova*!].” (SEE FIGURES 1 AND 2.)

Not that much before Vico, John Milton (1608-74) invokes a similar inspirational figure in the Proem of *Paradise Lost* (1667), initiating his Christian contribution to the {Homer → Vergil → . . .} epic continuum with an invocation to a *faux*-Classical-becoming-“scientific” source of inspiration:

Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of EDEN, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
Sing Heav’nly Muse

The curiosity that Milton does not *name* this Muse as he begins his epic has generated much speculation.³⁸ My own position is that Milton’s omission is a *sēma*, a literary “indicator” toward *Odyssey* 1.1:

ándra moi ennepe mousa polútropon

³⁷ Summarize other views.

³⁸

(“Tell, o Muse, of the much-buffeted / ‘myriad-minded’³⁹ man”)

Milton’s *paranomasía*—in which “Man” compactly refers to Adam, then Christ—mimes Odysseus the “errant” hero who is destined in the end to “put things right” when he returns to Ithaka. The unspecified “Heav’nly Muse” happens to resemble the *Odyssey*’s unnamed *mousa*, daughter of Zeus. In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, Kalliope, daughter of Zeus and Mnēmosúnē, is the *designated* Muse of Epic. In Theocritus, the several Muses are associated with Apollo. The point is that in his first Proem Milton chooses to imitate the earliest tradition he knows, the

³⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge applies this famous epithet uniquely to Shakespeare in various places, notably Chapter XV of the 1817 *Biographia Literaria* and the 1818 *Notes and Lectures on Shakspeare*. Coleridge himself glosses his appropriation thus, at the beginning of Chapter XV:

Ἀνὴρ μυριόνοσος, a phrase which I have borrowed from a [ninth-century] Greek monk, who applies it to a Patriarch of Constantinople. I might have said, that I have *reclaimed*, rather than borrowed it. For it seems to belong to Shakespear, de jure singulari et ex privilegio naturae.

The *BL*’s most recent editors, Walter Jackson Bate and James Engell, correct Coleridge’s memory slightly (vol. 2, p. 19, n. 3). In any case, the citation exemplifies his inveterate habit of jotting down quotations and linguistic oddities (this one first appears in his Notebook 1 at entry 1070), with the intent of using them to display his dynamic erudition. This enthusiasm for words as diachronic *sēmata* is one he shares with Vico.

Though the acknowledged source is Medieval, I propose that “myriad-minded” could feasibly also represent Coleridge’s (subconscious) conflation of two epithets applied to Odysseus in Homer: *polútropos* and *polumētis*. I base my suspicion on his pride in his Greek scholarship when he was a young student at Christ’s Hospital.

The association of Homer and Shakespeare reflects the tendency I detect among the English Romantics synchronize Homer as the *primus inter pares* of a genial triplet including Milton. The upshot of this “trinity” is that it de-emphasizes the preliterate origin of the Homeric poems while not actually denying it. See below, pp. 79-80.

Homeric one, which does not name the singer's Muse.

Yet in Book VII, lines 1-12 of this Christian emulation (this last word being justified by Book I, line 15: "Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rime") of Classical inspiration, Milton "restarts" his epic with a second Proem addressed to a particularized, only quasi-Classical figure of inspiration:

Descend from Heav'n URANIA, by that name
 If rightly thou art call'd, whose Voice divine
 Following, above th' OLYMPIAN Hill I soare,
 Above the flight of PEGASEAN wing.
 The meaning, not the Name I call: for thou
 Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top
 Of old OLYMPUS dwell'st, but Heav'nlie borne,
 Before the Hills appeerd, or Fountain flow'd,
 Thou with Eternal wisdom didst converse,
 Wisdom thy Sister, and with her didst play
 In presence of th' Almighty Father, pleas'd
 With thy Celestial Song

The two key phrases for understanding what Milton is up to in this second invocation are "If rightly thou art call'd" and "The meaning, not the Name I call." Since this Christian orthotic to what Vico will call *gentile* abhors polytheism as Nature abhors a vacuum, Milton's "second Muse" must come from outside the *mousaion* of antiquity. He thereby obtains poetical double-insolation by asserting that the audience should not take the invocation too seriously in the first place; "Urania" is a semiotic necessity occasioned by the *mimēsis* of the received epic form. This designated "Celestial" feminine figure "with Eternal

wisdom” imbues Milton’s “attempt” with both temporal and spiritual priority over pagan models, mainly Homer. A last crucial function Urania fulfills is to connect the spiritual with the ascendancy of science through her association with astronomy.

Vico mentions Urania as if he knows Milton:

§391. . . . The first muse must have been Urania, who contemplated heavens to take the auguries. Later she came to stand for astronomy. . . . Just as poetic metaphysics was above divided into all its subordinate sciences, each sharing the poetic nature of their mother, so the history of ideas will present the rough origins of both the practical sciences in use among the nations and out the speculative sciences which are now cultivated by the learned.

Vico associates Urania with Providence/Metaphysic, in a sense “renaming” her in order to legitimize a subordinate figure associated, via astronomy,⁴⁰ with science *as opposed to* religious history. Providence/Metaphysic, who so dominates his personally commissioned frontispiece, has from the very beginning assumed much the same function as Milton’s Urania:

§2. [I]n the present work, . . . she contemplates in God the world of human minds, which is the metaphysical world, in order to show His providence in the world of human spirits, which is the civil world or world of nations.

Here Vico announces his grand plan to move from the metaphysical to the historical. He wants his audience to think of the historical matrix he will be

⁴⁰ I am convinced that through Vico’s systematic *discoverta* principle as he describes it in Paragraph 6, the overthrown Greco-Roman celestial Titan Uranus is “hidden” in this citation of Urania. See below.

building as a scientific *Weltanschauung* that does not threaten the metaphysical one, but actually complements it, and can even be thought of as deriving from it. Vico's ardent description in §2 of the para-Miltonic Providence-Metaphysic stands in his favor against those who find him obscure, since She is there to give order to the entire *Scienza Nuova ex arkhēs*.

The similarity between the interrelated iconic functions of Vico's Providence-Metaphysic/"*Ignota Latebat*" and Milton's two Muses is part of the larger issue that Vico treats Roman institutions as evidence of pre-Christian European civilization. For like Milton, Vico *needs* the Classical world; for him it serves as a frame of reference against which to offset modernity. If one accepts this motive, it is not inconceivable that the "*Ignota Latebat*" icon is a *mīmēsis* of the Palladium, the statue of Athena / Minerva reputed to have been located in the Temple of Vesta in Rome. A major element of the Palladium's importance to Roman culture is that it was supposedly brought to Italy by her founder Aeneas after the Trojan War. Hence the Latinization of the Greek *Palladion*. In traditional Athenian civic *mūthos*, this was a wooden statue (*xóanon*) of Pallas Athene which had fallen from the sky. The chief aspects of the Palladion element come through in the account of the second century B.C.E. mythographer (pseudo-)Apollodorus in the *Bibliothekē*, or "Library." Though there is no specific reference in the *Scienza Nuova* to the Palladion → Palladium *mūthos*, there is one

to (pseudo-)Apollodorus:

§564. The shields of the ancients were covered with leather, as we learn from the poets that the old heroes dressed in leather, that is, in the hides of the beasts they hunted and killed. On this there is a fine passage in Pausanias where he says that leather clothing was invented by Pelasgus (an ancient hero of Greece after whom the people of that nation were first called Pelasgians, and whom Apollodorus in his *De origine deorum* calls autochthonous or son of earth, or, in a word, a giant.

Although there is no Vichian attestation that points to the *xóanon* itself as an influence, the details of the Greco-Roman *mūthos* provide just the kind of popular (in Vico, *volgare*) etiological narrative that will furnish the scope necessary for him to compete with Newton as a creator of systems, which is the grand *télos* the *Scienza Nuova* ultimately represents. I quote from the venerable Sir James G. Frazer translation for a purpose that will become clear:

[3.12.3] But Ilus went to Phrygia, and finding games held there by the king, he was victorious in wrestling. As a prize he received fifty youths and as many maidens, and the king, in obedience to an oracle, gave him also a dappled cow and bade him find a city wherever the animal should lie down; so he followed the cow. And when she was come to what was called the hill of the Phrygian Ate, she lay down; there Ilus built a city and called it Ilium [alternate name: "Troy"]. And having prayed to Zeus that a sign might be shown to him, he beheld by day the Palladium, fallen from heaven, lying before his tent. It was three cubits in height, its feet joined together; in its right hand it held a spear aloft, and in the other hand a distaff and spindle.

The story told about the Palladium is as follows: They say that when Athena was born she was brought up by Triton, who had a daughter Pallas; and that both girls practised the arts of war, but that once on

a time they fell out; and when Pallas was about to strike a blow, Zeus in fear interposed the aegis, and Pallas, being startled, looked up, and so fell wounded by Athena. And being exceedingly grieved for her, Athena made a wooden image in her likeness, and wrapped the aegis, which she had feared, about the breast of it, and set it up beside Zeus and honored it. But afterwards Electra, at the time of her violation, took refuge at the image, and Zeus threw the Palladium along with Ate into the Ilian country; and Ilus built a temple for it, and honored it. Such is the legend of the Palladium.

Apollodorus' account of Ilion / Ilium's founding is thematically rich; for our immediate purposes, it is enough to note that the Vergilian Aeneas is a typological *mímēsis* of Ilos. I believe one can reasonably extrapolate that Vergil quite deliberately took full vatic advantage of the mythic genealogy the Ilos story suggests. The resemblance is particularly striking at lines 5 and 6 of *Aeneid* I:

multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem,
and he suffered numerous misfortunes in war, all so he could found a city

inferretque deos Latio, genus unde Latinum
and carry his gods into Latium, whence arose the Latin people. . . .
(my translation)

Vergil's peek here at his epic's grand scheme fits Nagy's Aristotelian semiotic of *mímēsis* perfectly: the "this" of Ilion *is* the "that" of Augustan Rome.

Meanwhile, Frazer's own note on the Ilus passage allows me to link Vico with conventional Classical scholarship:

This legend of the foundation of Ilium by Ilus is repeated by Tzetzes, Scholiast on Lycophron 29. The site of Thebes is said to

have been chosen in obedience to a similar oracle. See above, Apollod. 3.4.1. Homer tells us (Hom. Il. 20.215ff.) that the foundation of Dardania on Mount Ida preceded the foundation of Ilium in the plain. As to the hill of Ate, compare Stephanus Byzantius, s.v. Ilium.

Frazer is seeking here to bolster his case with further examples from the traditions of Classical scholarship. Thus he gives an early example from Homer *as if the putative bard were an impeccable historical source*. Note that Frazer is doing this in order to show that even the primordial Hellenic bard was “himself” recording an antecedent foundation-*mūthos*. This motive, I argue, resembles the one driving Vico to make his comparative arguments in the *Scienza Nuova*. Another way to look at it is that Frazer’s backward gaze from (pseudo-) Apollodorus’ “authoritative” mythography in search of cultural origins describes Vico’s own predilections quite well, making Vico a plausible model for Frazer’s perspective.

And this theme of latency occurs elsewhere in the *Aeneid*. For the expropriation of the Palladion → Palladium by the Romans is as a permutation of an episode involving the evolution of the Hellenic Pantheon from Titanic to Olympian. Vergil gives this account at *Aeneid* VIII, lines 319-323:

primus ab aethereo uenit Saturnus Olympo
arma Iouis fugiens et regnis exsul ademptis.
 is genus indocile ac dispersum montibus altis
 composuit legesque dedit, Latiumque uocari
 maluit, his quoniam latuisset tutus in oris.

First Saturn came from the ethereal heights to Olympus,
 Fleeing Jupiter's arsenal—exiled, deprived of his domain;
 Then he brought together in one place the unruly people [*genus*
indocile; cf. Vico's *gentile*] that had been dispersed in the high
 mountains,
 And gave out laws, and he preferred the place to be called "Latium,"
 since it was the bounds [*oris*] within which he "had lain hidden"
 [*latuisset*].
 (my translation)

Vergil's account here of Jupiter's pursuit of his predecessor Saturn for the purpose of eliminating and replacing him is just the sort of story that appeals to Vico throughout the *Scienza Nuova*, because his fundamental rhetorical strategy is to argue from the Ancient to the Modern. While, as I said earlier, the "replacement" theme is inadequate to frame Nagy's ideas on the relationship between "the oral and the written" in the transmission of epic, it fits in perfectly well with Frazer's obsession with the *rex Nemorensis* paradigm of mimetic self-perpetuation in which, primordially, *pastores* and other such types became *reges* by pursuing and killing their immediate predecessors, only to be replaced eventually themselves; the influence from Vico is palpable.⁴¹

The present study's impetus is in the other direction—that is, toward demonstrating influences of Vergil and other Classical writers on Vico. Like

⁴¹ I emphasize that the Palladion → Palladium *mūthos* and the *rex Nemorensis* have different ritual origins: the former is associated with Athene → Minerva, the latter with Diana. The larger principle I wish my audience to derive from these core stories is that Vico's knowledge of them informed his preoccupations with cultural evolution and *la Discoverta*.

Vico, Vergil writes mythic narratives about the collective foundational spirit of the early Italians. A second striking adumbration occurs when Vergil displays an interest in the power of etymology and *Wortspiel*, as when he claims that “Latiumque uocari maluit, his quoniam latuisset tutus in oris.” But probably the most important similarity of this passage to certain arguments in Vico is that it establishes a motivation for Roman culture as a continuum from Greek culture. Vergil fixes the linchpin, as it were, of this thematic framework smack at the epic’s center, in Book 6, lines 51-53:

Tu [Aeneas] regere imperio populos Romane memento:
 Hae tibi erunt artes: pacique imponere morem,
 Parcere subiectis, et debellare superbos.

(“Remember, o Roman, you rule the peoples [you have conquered] through *imperium*⁴²: These will be your arts: to impose a lasting institutional peace, to be sparing of willing subjects, and ‘demilitarize’ the ‘high and mighty.’”)

Celerrimē dictu: Greece ruled one way. Rome will “replace” Hellas. BUT Rome will rule its own way. The irony hidden in this famous passage is that long before Vergil composed it, Roman culture had metabolized Hellenic culture, “re-

⁴² *Imperium* is a complex concept that, for the present purposes, I define as the power Augustus had granted to himself as the supposed rightful successor of the early legendary kings of “Latium.” Notice how well this concept fits in with Vico’s dependence on mythology to make claims about the evolution of European political institutions. I stress that this cannot be viewed as an accident if one accepts my premise that a chief source of Vico’s anti-Cartesian “empirical evidence” is his appeal to the fundamental veracity of the Classical corpus.

performing” its art, and even much of its technology.

In summary, Vico’s predilection for “recovery of the hidden” has numerous ancient precedents. In a recent paper presented for a colloquium at the Center for Hellenic Studies, Richard H. Armstrong observes:

[Some interpreters] in antiquity chose to take the outrageous surface of Homeric-Hesiodic myth as a kind of hermeneutical *Ansatz*, a signal of absurdity (*atopía, to apemphainon*) that the wise can follow in order to get at the *huponoia* or “undersense” of the myth. The truth of Homeric poetry can thus be converted to an account of phusis (as was reputedly one of the strategies of Theagenes of Rhegium) or a metaphysical narrative of the soul and its imperiled state in the world of matter (Porphyry’s *In the Cave of the Nymphs*), or any of the many meta-narratives and meta-verities detailed by the allegorist Heraclitus. We find that after the creeping Christianization of ancient culture, these two options—utter rejection (e.g., Justin Martyr, Exhortation to the Greeks) and tendentious *allegoresis* (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*)—remained available.

Much like Armstrong, regarding Vico I shall be trying to establish is a lineage rooted in the Classical corpus that will explain the nature of his narrative and argumentation in the *Scienza Nuova*. I am using Armstrong’s citation of the Ancients’ *huponoia* to reinforce my own gloss of Vico’s beloved concept of *discoverta* as both “dis-covery” and “re-covery,” implying “something latent” (cf. my citation just above from *Aeneid* VIII) beneath the pure narrative level that some “archeologist of knowledge” (borrowing from Foucault) has the obligation—and my language here is what deliberate and appropriate—to expose.

By now the reader may reasonably be wondering why I devote so much of my argument to Roman authors when my nominal focus is on Vico's ambiguous Homer figure. The answer is that I want my audience to think of Homer as an important kinetic element in Vico's evolutionary tripartite historical theory. His deliberately counter-Judeo-Christian Muse, Providence/Metaphysic /"Ignota Latebat," exposes the importance of his abiding obsession with triads. I believe that the *fons et origo* of Vico's fascination with groups of three may have been the Holy Trinity, operating quite deeply in accordance with his dependence on the latency principle. This is a risky assertion for me to be making, since he mentions the Trinity explicitly very late and only once in the *Scienza Nuova*, and with a distinctly contravening thrust:

§605. [The] Greek Mercury was . . . Thoth, the Mercury who gives laws to the Egyptians, represented by the hieroglyph of Knef. He is described as a serpent, to denote the cultivated land. He has the head of a hawk or eagle, as the hawks of Romulus later became the Roman eagles, representing the heroic auspices. He is girt by a belt as a sign of the Herculean knot, and in his hand he bears a scepter, which signifies the reign of the Egyptian priests. He wears a winged cap, as an indication of their eminent domain over the land. And finally he holds an egg in his mouth, which stood for the sphere of Egypt, if indeed it is not the golden apple which signified the eminent domain the priests held over the lands of Egypt. Into this hieroglyph Manetho read the generation of the entire world, and the conceit of the learned reached such an absurd extreme that Athanasius Kircher in his *Obeliscus pamphilius* affirms that this hieroglyph represents the Holy Trinity.

Vico cannot accept Kircher's speculation the Egyptian trinity "represents" the

Holy Trinity. Yet he fails to make clear exactly why. Probably it is a matter of his not wishing to commit a sacrilege. This would be thoroughly consonant with the setting apart of the “sacred” from the “profane,” to invoke Mircea Eliade’s famous dichotomy, with which Vico treats the Hebrews in relation to “pagan” antiquity. But another strong probability, I argue, has to do with Vico’s ever-present awareness of chronology. Christ’s story as given theological meaning by Paul and the Council of Nicea took place long after what Vico could only safely interpret as the *coincidental* formation of the Egyptian trinity. Yet it is theistically prior, or “present,” to invoke Derrida once again. Hence while purporting to be a *denial* that the Trinity lies at the structural base of the *Scienza Nuova*, §605’s rather surprising last-second detour, as it were, in the direction of the *possibility* of a *sēma* of the Holy Trinity tacks a connection with Christianity onto what is otherwise a *mimēsis* of an earlier scenario confined to the tripartite patterns of pagan history:

§432. At the outset of our discussion, . . . we posit as a first principle the philological axiom that according to the Egyptians there had been spoken in the world in all preceding time three languages corresponding in number and order to the three ages that had elapsed in their world: the ages of gods, heroes, and men. The first language had been hieroglyphic, sacred or divine; the second, symbolic; by signs or by heroic devices; the third, epistolary, for men at a distance to communicate to each other the current needs of their lives. [Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 5.4.] Concerning these three languages there are two golden passages in Homer’s *Iliad* from which it clearly appears that the Greeks agreed with the Egyptians in this matter. In the first [1.250ff] it is told how

Nestor lived through three generations of men speaking different languages. Nestor must therefore have been a heroic character of the chronology determined by the three languages corresponding to the three ages of the Egyptians; and the phrase "to live the years of Nestor" must have meant "to live the years of the world." The other passage [20.215 ff] is that in which Aeneas relates to Achilles that men of different languages began to inhabit Ilium after Troy was moved to the seashore and Pergamum because of its fortress. To this first principle we join the tradition, also Egyptian, that their Thoth or Mercury invented both law and letters.

The flow of Vico's associations in §605 and its antecedent §432 (both from Book II, "Poetic Wisdom") would seem to discredit my claim that the Trinity is a fundamental controller. He spurns the notion of the late Renaissance / early Enlightenment German Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680) that the ancient Egyptian grouping Osiris-Isis-Horus could have "represented" the Trinity. In fact, in §605 Vico omits Horus the "Son" and substitutes Thoth, who in the *mūthos* serves as a surrogate father figure (may one suggest this god as an Egyptian template for Joseph??) because Osiris is absent, though present. And Vico's emphasis on Thoth carries still greater weight because he associates this Egyptian god with Hermes / Mercury, the Greco-Roman enabler of diachronic hermeneutics.

Despite all this, I contend that Vico's primary *auctoritas* regarding Thoth is probably not Kircher, but more likely Plato's *Phaedrus*:

SOCRATES: At the Egyptian city of Naucratis, there was a famous old god, whose name was Theuth [i.e., Thoth]; the bird which is called the Ibis is sacred to him, and he was the inventor of many

arts, such as arithmetic and calculation and geometry and astronomy and draughts and dice, but his great discovery was the use of letters. Now in those days the god Thamus was the king of the whole country of Egypt; and he dwelt in that great city of Upper Egypt which the Hellenes call Egyptian Thebes, and the god himself is called by them Ammon. To him came Theuth and showed his inventions, desiring that the other Egyptians might be allowed to have the benefit of them; he enumerated them, and Thamus enquired about their several uses, and praised some of them and censured others, as he approved or disapproved of them. It would take a long time to repeat all that Thamus said to Theuth in praise or blame of the various arts. But when they came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is a specific both for the memory and for the wit. Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific art which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.

—Jowett translation

Of particular interest in the present context is Socrates' assertion that *Mnēmosúnē* (memory) is not the same thing as *anamnēsis* (recollection), a faculty which the alphabet aids. In this particular passage, for the Platonic Socrates, recollection seems actually in some way *inferior* to memory. This element is

missing from Vico's §432 and §605, but it will inform his Homer paradigm in "la Discoverta."

Vico's reference to Kircher is also significant because, being a Jesuit, the German was not only a theologian, but a widely inquisitive "late Renaissance man." Today, Kircher is recognized as an Orientalist and pioneering scientist in fields ranging from geology to bacteriology who is often considered on a par with Leonardo. Kircher, for instance, observed microbes through a microscope, and suggested that they might cause the plague. Of great pertinence to Vico's hermeneutics here is that Kircher was interpreting hieroglyphics a century and a half before Champollion. Vico's explicit response to Kircher reflects the Italian's abiding desire to be respected as a scientist as well as an historian.

Beyond the hidden Trinity, Vico's triads are not "accidental" or "subconscious"; he almost always marks them rhetorically. Perhaps the most concentrated expression of this phenomenon occurs directly after Book III, as an Introduction to Book IV:

§915. In virtue of the principles of this Science established in Book One, and of the origins of all the divine and human institutions investigated and discovered in Book II, and of the discovery in Book III that the poems of Homer are two great treasure stores of the *gentes* of Greece [902ff; *nota bene* the triplet] (just as we had already found the Law of the Twelve Tables to be a great monument of the natural law of the *gentes* of Latium. . .), we shall now, by the aid of this philosophical and philological illustration, and relying on the axioms concerning the ideal internal history. . . , discuss in Book Four the course the nations run, proceeding in all their various and

diverse customs with constant uniformity upon the division of the three ages which the Egyptians said had elapsed before them in their world, namely, the successive ages of gods, heroes, and men [51; *nota bene* both the triplet and the anticipation of Schopenhauer's understanding of the ontological function of Time]. For the nations will be seen to develop in conformity with this division, by a constant and uninterrupted order of causes and effects present in every nation, through customs. . . ; and in virtue of these customs three kinds of natural laws of the gentes are observed. . . ; and in consequence of these laws three kinds of civil states or commonwealths are instituted. . . And to the end that men who have come to human society made on the one and communicate to each other the three kinds of all the aforesaid major institutions, three kinds of languages. . . and as many of characters are formed. . . ; and to the end that they may on the other hand justify them, three kinds of jurisprudence. . . assisted by three kinds of authority. . . and three kinds of reason in as many of judgments. . . . That three kinds of jurisprudence for available in three sects of times, which the nations profess in the course of their lives. These [eleven] tripartite special unities, with many others that derive from them and will also be enumerated in this Book. . . , are all embraced by one general unity. This is the unity of the religion of a provident divinity, which is the unity of spirit that informs and gives life to this world of nations. . . .

Here we can detect Vico's epideictic impetus toward his famous eventual argument in Book Five concerning the recurrent historical patterns (*ricorsi*) of the *nazioni*.

At one point in Book II (§313), Vico makes what seems to be an unambiguous differentiation: "Whereas the Gentile [in *this* case!] nations had only the ordinary help of Providence, the Hebrews had extraordinary help from the

true God.” This hierarchy obviously presents hermeneutic problems, since it implies that the whole history of European culture that Vico will be explicating is the product of a kind of *demiourgós*, suggesting influence from the *Timaeus*, the *Theatetus*, and especially the Neoplatonic “second Creator” doctrine of Plotinus. On the other hand, a great part of the significance of Vico’s thoroughly reverent obeisance to the primacy of the Hebrews, as he makes manifest even *over* the Trinity, is that it provides a key to understanding why in the *Scienza Nuova* God is simultaneously accommodated and disguised in Vico’s female figure of Providence / Metaphysic / *Ignota Latebat*..

Here I must digress concerning the translation of Vico’s ubiquitous *gentile* with the self-evident cognate “Gentile.” Vico uses this pivotal word *gentile* in two senses: (1) suggestively *passim* in its Pauline sense of “non-Hebrew; uncircumcised” and (2) more pertinently to the case he is putting, as referring to the pre-Christian Roman *gentes* or “clans.” Determining exactly how Vico is using the word *gentile* at one or another point in the *Scienza Nuova* is more difficult than it might seem, and thus merits an extended scholium. To begin with, in the *Scienza Nuova* the word appears in three forms: *gentile* and its plural *gentili*; the adjectival form *gentileSCO*; and *le genti*, which is the Italian equivalent of French *les gens* or Spanish *la gente*. The basic problem comes in determining how far-removed one should interpret any of these forms as being, in Vico’s

usage, from specifically “non-Hebrew,” especially given that he recognizes a special original relationship between the Hebrews and the Judeo-Christian God. In a staunch defense of Bergrin and Fisch’s 1948 *Scienza Nuova* translation over David Marsh’s 1999 Penguin version, Donald Phillip Verene is adamantly in favor of retaining the former’s “Gentile” over the latter’s “pagan.” Verene argues thus:

The contrast either to Hebrew or Jew is a “Gentile,” not “pagan.” The source of this distinction is found in Leviticus 20: 23-26, where all non-Jews are those belonging to the “nations of the world.” “Gentile” is the rendering of a Greek word to mean “non-Jew.” In the New Testament (Acts 11), “Gentile Christianity” is presented as drawing its members from among non-Jews. Vico’s *Gentile* [sic] is a play on these biblical meanings, along with its meaning in Roman law and its Latin meaning (the adjective of *gens*) of being of the same clan or family [cf. Vico’s hypothetical etymological proto-form *famuli*], of the same nation. . . . A Gentile is one belonging to the nations at large as opposed to be Hebrew nation.

In the *New Science* Vico never uses the word “pagan,” *pagano*.
 . . . ⁴³

I concur with Verene’s view that the special status of the Hebrews in relation to non-Hebrews is a vital component of Vico’s theory of history. The purpose of this distinction is to reflect the special and original relationship the ancient Hebrews had with God. Giuseppe Mazzotta expresses the issue as follows:

The radical historical separation between Jews and gentiles, whereby each world is outside of the other, challenges the very possibility of

⁴³ “On Translating Vico: The Penguin Classics Edition of the *New Science*” (*New Vico Studies*, vol. 17, 1999, pp. 85-107), p. 104.

a totality. Their difference refracts itself as a lack of economic and social interaction and suggests that each culture constitutes a totality unto itself. But this dissociation is not only economic: it has ethical theological roots that involve the exclusive, historical sense that the Jews have of the destiny of the biblical text. The absolute, self-enclosed quality of the "book" is linked to their desire to prevent the profanation of the religion all the true God through commerce win the gentiles. God's own jealousy is the sign of his love's radical exclusiveness, and it is shown in the establishment of boundaries meant to shelter the purity of the Bible.⁴⁴

It is easy to be influenced in this direction by, e.g., the elaborate "Chronological Table" at the very front of the *Scienza Nuova*. But there is another way to think of "Gentile / pagan" which reflects the work's emphasis on the diachronic development of European culture, and which hence patently excludes (or rather *protects*) the ancient Hebrews. Bergrin and Fisch catch this meaning in their Introduction:

B4. The adjective for the noun *gens* is "gentile." This adjective has two chief uses. One as a technical use in Roman law, where it denotes a degree of relationship for purposes of inheritance, as in Vico's recurring phrase "direct heirs, agnates, and gentiles." . . . The other and much more frequent use is to emphasize the fact that the nations with whose nature the new science is concerned are the "gentile" nations. Such a nation as he contemplates is isolated in the first place from the Hebrew people, and only in the second place from other gentile nations. . . . Vico, of course, never uses the redundant phrase "*gentile gentes*"; the term *gentes* has the emphatic meaning without the adjective. But we are to understand throughout that the families, *gentes*, peoples and nations in question

⁴⁴ Giuseppe Mazzotta, "The Homeric Question," Chapter Six of *The New Map of the World: The Poetic Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1999), pp. 241-242.

are gentile. All statements about the Hebrews are to be understood as asides or *obiter dicta*; they are no part of the science. (p. xxi)

Unlike Verene (who also cites this passage), I think their explanation here pretty obviously underplays the biblical connection. Instead, they construe Vico to be referring to early European social history, a subject on which he considered himself a bona fide scholar through his knowledge of the Greco-Roman continuum. It is thus also a portal for displaying his awareness of early Enlightenment jurisprudential theory. Hence I contend that Samuel von Pufendorf's 1672 title *De jure naturæ et gentium*, (*On the Law of Nature and Peoples*), a pioneering treatise distinguishing among Divine law, ecclesiastical law, and the concept of human social contract, is a very plausible influence on Vico's meaning.

This is not to say that Vico does not ever make an explicit biblical nexus; several entries in the *Scienza Nuova* indicate that he thinks of certain events that take place in Genesis (most notably the story of Noah and the "Great Flood") as evidence of a universal history that began by setting Hebrews apart from non-Hebrews. But throughout his work such biblical narratives remain rather in the background.

For these reasons, I hold that Marsh's "pagan" for *gentile* is generally much more appropriate than "Gentile." As Verene himself observes, Vico never uses

pagano. I look at this absence in an opposite way than he does. It is a distortion to claim that *gentile* always signifies the biblical relationship for Vico. Direct references in the *Scienza Nuova* to the Hebrews that would reasonably be marked by Bergin and Fisch's capitalized cognate "Gentile" are purposely infrequent. Meanwhile, Books II, III, IV, and V contain uses of *gentili* that focus on "pagan" cultures without having anything to do with the primacy of the Hebrews. In these units of his vision, as far as I can see, Vico does not make an overt distinction between non-Hebrews and pre-Christian "barbarians"; to do so would be redundant for him. So I contend that *gentile* and *pagano* mean the same thing, and this is why *pagano* does not appear.

Marsh's choice of "pagan" is both closer to Vico's practical ethnographic meaning of "pre-Christian Europeans," and (arguably) more typical of eighteenth-century usage. It conveys his theme that *gentili* were polytheists who created relatively primitive (Vico's *volgare*) institutions that evolved over the centuries. As external support for this rendering, I cite the usage of Thomas Taylor (1758-1835), who translated many Neoplatonic and Orphic texts. According to the *Dictionary of National Biography* (vol. 19, p. 469), because of his interests in these texts, Taylor served as a model for "England's gentile [my emphasis] priest' in Mathias's 'Pursuits of Literature' (iii, 31-32)." Here the deliberately lower-case "gentile" means not that the fictional priest was not a Hebrew, but rather that his

heretical enthusiasms dredged up the ancient pre-Christian, Greek, Roman, and even Egyptian *pagan civilizations*.

As further support for my gloss, I introduce the claim I shall be developing that Descartes' *Discours de la Méthode* was a covert lexical template and "anti-*auctoritas*" for the *Scienza Nuova*. Early in Part One Descartes speaks of his attraction to mathematics:

Je me plaisais surtout aux mathématiques, à cause de la certitude et de l'évidence de leurs raisons: . . . au contraire je comparais les écrits des anciens païens qui traitent des mœurs, à des palais fort superbes et fort magnifiques qui n'étaient bâtis que sur du sable et sur de la boue

("I took a special pleasure in mathematics, because of the certitude and self-evidence of its logic: . . . against this, I compared the writings of the ancient pagans which dealt with customs [Latin *morēs*] to very superb, very magnificent palaces built upon nothing but sand and mud. . ." My translation)

Descartes is clear that his discovery in youth of mathematics gave him a weapon with which to combat the Doubt he derives from every source that smacks of Classical pagan *auctoritas*, whose obvious weakness for him is its status as only a transitory form of knowledge. This is the thrust of Descartes' wonderful metaphor linking pagans, palaces, and mud.

In sum, I have seen fit to substitute "pagan" for Bergin and Fisch's "Gentile" expressly to emphasize Vico's "scientific" teleutic that the ancient Greeks and Romans "evolved" into more "civilized" European Christians.

In any event, whichever of the heretofore described triple *mímēsēs* Vico's Muse assumes, it is She who illuminates his fundamental vision. Just as this "thrice-born" figure is made possible by an emblematic practice common in Vico's time, She in turn makes Vico's vision of a culture that evolved in three stages possible. Here I am appropriating—in a thoroughly Kierkegaardian act—Kierkegaard's own kinetic principle of *muliggjørelse*, "a making-possible," a semiotic device the philosopher introduces the initiating element of his method in "The Making-Possible of the Idea," Chapter One of his 1841 doctoral thesis *Om begrebet ironi (On the Concept of Irony)*. Kierkegaard states that an accurate (or, employing Vico's diction, *vero*, "true") understanding of Socrates entails a "triangulation," if you will, of the accounts of Xenophon, Plato, and Aristophanes. I submit that a similar empowering theme of the "hermeneutic triplet" dominates Vico's mythico-historical paradigms.

To summarize, for both Milton and Vico, the Muse, not the flux of human history, is a *sēma* of an unrecovered state of being. Is it merely a coincidence that the origin of the construct "Muse" itself is made possible for both them through their Homeric anxieties? Or do these emblems actually signal that neither man is fully ready to abandon the Classical (pagan!) tradition?

History as derived from the cross-cultural instantiation of *la fabula*

gentilesca is at the “phenomenal” center of Vico’s architectonic. While he includes the Egyptians in his chronology of acculturation (creating the *gentile* triplet {Egyptians → Greeks→ Romans}), his obsessive interest is in the Greco-Roman cultural continuum. Some time after beginning this project I discovered that Patrick H. Hutton has also approached Vico from the “continuum” angle, though he does not use the term. Hutton writes:

To crack the code [i.e., of layers of historical meaning] Vico turned to the writers of antiquity, although it was to their texts rather than to their teachings that he repaired. As interpreters of their preliterate past, the literate philosophers of late antiquity were no more insightful than their modern counterparts, for present-minded memories likewise stood in their way. Thus they bequeathed to austerity a misinterpretation [cf. Harold Bloom’s “misprision”] of the wisdom of earlier oral tradition. Their texts were nonetheless useful, for their phrasing often bore vestiges of the poetic code, and hence unwittingly enshrined its wisdom. It is important to note that Vico’s primary sources for the history of the origin of civilization are the texts of the manuscript culture of Greece and Rome, particularly the early texts that stood just beyond the threshold of literacy. In the *New Science* he interpolated them for what they encoded of the mentality of the preliterate culture out of which they emerged and of which they continued to provide indirect testimony.⁴⁵

Hutton’s judgment about Vico’s “code” is a virtually inescapable conclusion.

Moreover, I concur that an important component of Vico’s “interpretive agenda” is the ironic difficulty that, despite what Vico hoped he would be able to do, the

⁴⁵ “The Problem of Oral Tradition in Vico’s Historical Scholarship,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 53, No. 1 (1992), pp. 3-23, p. 7.

end result was to be a “misinterpretation.” This is the major reason I have expropriated Bloom’s theories on the inevitability of “misprision” to my analysis. Unlike Hutton, I have chosen to stress Vico’s implementation of the “texts” that are available to him as counter-Cartesian (and, somewhat ironically, also counter-Newtonian) substitutes for true scientific data. From this viewpoint, though it may be “true” (*vero*) for Vico that poetic “phrasing often bore vestiges of the poetic code” (which is greatly aided by his penchant for etymology), he seldom quotes—or, indeed, is by scholarly consensus *capable* of quoting—from the poetry itself. This means that his “data” are, being generous, relatively tenuous proof justifying his theory. Thus while it is true that Vico *believes* he is creating a “mental dictionary” useful for understanding the interpretations permitted by the “Classical corpus,” in reality there is usually only a slim basis for his confidence. Instead, the most important component of his “oral theory,”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ This is a phrase Nagy rather dislikes. In *Homeric Questions*, he writes:

The existence of oral poetry is a fact, ascertained by way of fieldwork. The application of what we know inductively about oral poetry to the text of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, or any other text, is not an attempt to prove a “theory” about oral poetry. If we are going to use the word *theory* at all in such a context, it would be more reasonable to say that Parry and Lord at various theories about the affinity of Homeric poetry with what we know about oral poetry. (p. 20)

Throughout my paper, the Parry-Lord Hypothesis will obviously be in the background as a methodological standard for evaluating the prescience of Vico’s ideas about Homer. Nagy’s criticism in this passage of the notion of always needing to “prove” one particular theory over others manifestly applies well to the ethnographic study of oral

Book III, derives its plausibility from the “modern instances” of contemporary Italian singer-types juxtaposed to the “ancient instances” of the Homeric and cyclic poets. Probably the most underestimated factor in Vico’s misprision of the Greco-Roman continuum is that the common thinking before the advent of Romantic *Sprachlehre* was that Latin actually evolved *directly* from Greek; such an assumption would, it seems to me, naturally encourage more confidence in the *auctoritas* of Varro, Cicero, Tacitus, et al. concerning the collected Homeric material than is warranted. Though Hutton does not recognize this *a priori* assumption explicitly, it is clearly pertinent to his observation about the connection between the *oral* Homer and the *original* form of the Twelve Tables:

[T]wo [corpora] in particular held . . . [Vico’s] attention as he sought to span the gap between the mentalities of literate and preliterate people: the Law of the Twelve Tables of ancient Rome and the Homeric epics of ancient Greece. Both emerged out of oral tradition yet stand for the historian as signposts on the threshold of literacy in the ancient world. They adduce the two sides of Vico’s project: the inquiries into law and literature. These might seem to be quite different topics. But Vico showed how closely they were allied in antiquity, and he argued for their common foundations. Ancient Rome and law, he explained, was in its origins “a serious poem, and ancient jurisprudence a severe kind of poetry.” [1027] (“Oral Tradition,” p. 8)

traditions around the world. Yet I believe that the phrase “oral theory” is useful in designating the advance that the pioneering “systematic” theorists like Vico and Herder, and the Romantics who followed them, were trying to make over the outworn controversies of the “Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns.” To put it another way, “theory” in the singular emphasizes the word’s root meaning of “overall perspective” or “way of viewing.”

The most incisive aspect of Hutton's assessment is his ordering of Vico's priorities, which set Roman jurisprudential history over anything having to do with Greek culture *per se*. This interest is entirely in keeping with the predominance of references to *Roman* stories in the *Scienza Nuova*. A signal way in which this rhetorical preference is manifested is that outside of the question of how the Homeric poems were created and transmitted, Vico consistently depicts their *dramatis personæ* as *volgari*, a favorite word of his that, in his Protean hermeneutics, can have the judgmental meaning "barbarous" as well as the denotative "of the people." This pejorative characterization reflects, I contend, Vico's awareness of Plato's *literary* "sieve," so to speak.

Vico explicates this cultural nexus most fully in Book II; but his first authority in this regard to is Varro, whom he cites very early, in the "Idea of the Work," as a seminal authority for of his tripartite historical paradigm:

§6. [There] are . . . three times of the world which Marcus Terentius Varro, the most learned writer on Roman antiquities, recorded for us in his great work entitled [*The Antiquities*] of *Divine and Human Institutions* . . ., which has been lost.

Notably, this is the first half of the Paragraph I focused on earlier which displays Vico's anticipation of modern oral-evolutionary models. Taken as a whole, then, §6 in Vico's propaedeutic "Idea of the Work" epitomizes Vico's duality regarding Homer. (Vico also candidly employs Tacitus, Horace, Cicero and the Hellenized Roman Plutarch, whose masterpiece the *Parallel Lives* is itself a magnificent

exemplar of the putative continuum. Other references to the Classical corpus abound, as well. And then there is Plato, whose “divine” status receives Vico’s special attention. Here I invoke Schopenhauer’s epithet in *The Fourfold Root*:

The divine Plato and the marvellous Kant unite their mighty voices in recommending a rule, to serve as the method of all philosophising as well as of all other science. . . . Two laws, they tell us [.] . . . the law of homogeneity and the law of specification, should be equally observed, neither to the disadvantage of the other.

These two “laws” happen to provide one way of describing the oral-evolutionary Homeric model. The tradition is *homogeneous* in preserving the Archaic songs which the apprentice poet learned from the previous generation; and the individual “recomposition-in-performance” exemplifies *specification* by the individual performer.

Regarding Homeric epic, Schopenhauer’s epistemological distinction is particularly useful because it allows us to avoid confusing “specification” with “textualization.” Gregory Nagy has recently provided this global definition of “performer”:

Attested in a wide variety of societies, from prehistoric times all the way into the present, oral traditions can most broadly be described as verbal systems of expression combining performance and composition.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ “Performance and text in ancient Greece,” *Oxford Handbook of Hellenic Studies*, eds. George Boys-Stones, Barbara Graziosi, and Phiroze Vasunia. Permission has been granted by Oxford University Press to publish an electronic version of this text after the abridged print version has appeared.

For Nagy, “composition” in this context avoids reference to writing altogether. He rejects any model for this performer of epic that, inadvertently or otherwise, posits a time in the Archaic period when the evolutionary aspect of *epōs* is somehow arrested—as, for example, by introducing writing too early as a definitive preserver in transmission. Thus, in contrast to Derrida’s, Nagy’s very understanding of *Mnēmosúnē* is “phonocentric” rather than “logocentric.”⁴⁸ I shall be arguing that this forbearance in introducing textuality into his model too soon as an *explanation* for the durability of *epōs* is the salient difference between Nagy’s ideas and those of many of his academic contemporaries.

Meanwhile, the *methodological* legacy from Vico that lies hidden within the homogeneity/specification dichotomy is that Schopenhauer sees these two flagrantly dialectical laws as fundamental to any science. They certify, as it were, Vico’s “Discovery of the True Homer” as an attempt at a scientific investigation based on the hermeneutics of “change-through-Time.” Late in the *Scienza Nuova* Vico applies the very same epithet for Plato that Schopenhauer will later employ, also to mark a lineage of philosophers:

§1109. . . . Epicurus, who believes in chance is refuted by the facts, along with his followers Hobbes and Machiavelli; and so are Zeno and Spinoza, who believe in fate. The evidence clearly confirms the contrary position of the political philosophers, whose prince is the

⁴⁸ In support of this position I reiterate that the root meaning of the Homeric word *kléos*, most commonly glossed as the reputation in posterity to which all heroes aspire, is “that which is heard.”

divine Plato [cf. Schopenhauer just above!], who shows that providence directs human institutions. Cicero was therefore right in refusing to discuss laws with Atticus unless the latter would give up his Epicureanism and first concede that providence governed human institutions. Pufendorf implicitly denied this. . . . Selden took it for granted, and Grotius left it out of [his] account but the Roman juriconsults established it as the first principle of the natural law of the gentes. . . .

So many of the key elements are present here that shape Vico's attempt to move away from philology toward "legitimizing" his historical vision as a science.

Plato influences Cicero, who in turn rejects the chaotic element of Epicurus, and thus of Lucretius. Introducing the question of whether "reality" is fortuitous or predetermined permits Vico to display his awareness of recent European jurisprudential theory. Notice, however, that rhetorically, Vico is anxious to return to the theme of Roman precursors of modern European institutions that effectually constitute the "critical mass" of the *Scienza Nuova*.

Vico's and Schopenhauer's coincidental (?) invocations of Plato as *existentially* superior to his successors expose the main difficulty in accepting Vico's grand paradigms. He uses his sources not as a true "natural" or "contractarian" philosopher would, but rather as one might expect a rhetoric professor, or *filólogo*, would: to construct a historical argument based on linguistic evidence (etymology). Obviously, the weakness in this approach is that he treats his derivations as if they actually provided anti-Cartesian scientific data. The consensus seems to be that Vico sees word origins as the key to

understanding how humanity progressed from *mūthos* and metaphor to concrete institutions. The key to this progression is *fantasia*, immediately translatable as “imagination” but expandable in the Vichian context as “the free play of the human spirit revealed through evolved meanings.” The problem with thinking of Vico’s etymologies as “playful” is that they are actually dead serious. And it is a seriousness based *not only* on the geometrician’s ideal of demonstrating a valid proof from a chain of intermediary steps (as in early sections of the *Scienza Nuova*), *but also* on expecting his readers to accept his etymologies as authoritative beyond question, just as his controlling anti-Cartesian mirror-template requires. Cartesian geometrical thinking is constantly “present” as something to which Vico feels he is obligated to respond. The difficulty comes for us when Vico asserts that he, too, is a geometrician. Peter Burke comments:

It is surely significant that Vico himself referred to his method as a geometrical one. “Our science proceeds exactly as does geometry” (*questa scienza procede appunto come la geometria . . .* [*Scienza Nuova*, Book III, 349]). Italian correspondents of Vico praised both his *Universal Law* and his *New Science* at the time of their publication for their geometrical method, a phrase reminiscent of the fashionable Descartes and of other seventeenth-century philosophers, notably Spinoza, who described his treatise on ethics as “proved geometrically” (*ordine geometrico demonstrata*)

How seriously, how literally are we to take Vico’s reference to geometry? It cannot be reduced to a mere figure of speech, because the phrase is not isolated. The *New Science* does, after all, begin with a hundred and fourteen axioms. Some modern commentators on Vico cannot believe that these axioms have anything to do with geometry, and suggest that they are simply aphorisms in which the main themes of the book are stated in lapidary form. An obvious

parallel, indeed one which Vico himself was likely to have had in mind when he was writing, is that of Bacon, who stressed induction at the expense of deduction and would therefore have had truck with axioms, yet presented his *Novum Organum* in the form of a hundred and eighty-two aphorisms. And yet there was an important difference between the two aphorists. In Vico did claim to be producing axioms in the sense of propositions from which certain conclusions necessarily follow. He did claim, unlike Bacon, to be deductive. "We will demonstrate," he wrote on more than one occasion, *dimostreremo*. He also referred to his "proofs" and his "corollaries."⁴⁹

Burke has identified the annoying difficulty in assessing Vico's appropriation (again, cf. Kierkegaard) of geometry terms. Does he really believe that the axioms that predominate in the opening sections of the *Scienza Nuova* have the same force as true geometric axioms? Or is he being rhetorical in hopes that his audience will accept him as another, say, Newton or Kircher, through the manifest compulsion of his inductive argument? B.A. Haddock provides a constructive way to react to this question. He has written:

These [axiomatic] principles were implicit in the *Scienza Nuova prima* [1725] and were the ground of his argument that the Law of the Twelve Tables could not have been transmitted from a civilized Greece to a barbarous Rome. But in the later formulation the "Elements" are stated in an abstract and axiomatic form and are given an apparent epistemological status distinct from the historical accounts in which they were previously embodied. (1979, pp. 585-586)

Haddock believes, as do I, that Vico's basic professional objective is to place

⁴⁹ Peter Burke, *Vico* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), p. 80.

himself squarely in the center of the European epistemological controversies of his day. Haddock realizes that Vico's obstacle in achieving this integration is that ultimate *terminus ad quem* of Vico's *mímēsis* of a geometric model in the early, propaedeutic "Elements" section of the *Scienza Nuova* is not science *per se*, but rather jurisprudence as understood through study of the Classical corpus. Accordingly, Vico's work is scientific mainly to the extent that, as was commonly recognized among the great jurisprudential scholars to whose work he is reacting, a sound hermeneutical understanding of the law required constructing *a priori* a rational, consistent framework. But his "scientific method" is quite pseudo-phenomenological, quite irrationalist—quite *Freudian*, if you will—in the sense that in "della Discoverta" and elsewhere it is "sub-textual" ("*dis-coverta*"). To "uncover" this aspect of the *Scienza Nuova*, Haddock rightly associates Vico's interest in treating history as a science with the idea of creating a "modern" jurisprudential theory based on historical precedent, i.e., Roman law as it had evolved from Greek cultural institutions. An element which Haddock seems not to catch here is that the "Elements" section takes the form that it does in the *Scienza nuova's* "mature" versions (1730, 1744) precisely because Vico is attempting something paradoxical: he is imitating axiomatic form while seeking rhetorically to undermine the reliability of Descartes' confidence in geometry. Hence one can credit Vico here with developing a proto-Romantic dialectic

triplet whose synthetic third member is “that which is hidden,” as it were.

It has become a commonplace to accept Vico’s dependence on etymology as a dynamic component of his philosophy which is flagrantly antithetical to a Cartesian system that does not address how “knowledge” changes through history. What I have not seen in the literature is significant attention to the suspect (or should one say “convenient”?) nature of these etymologies, other than to characterize them as “amateurish.”⁵⁰ In any event, the impression one gets as one reads through Vico’s fairly complex etymologies is that he feels completely justified in moving back and forth between one linguistic pool (Greek) to another (Latin). I argue that he can do this because he honestly believes that Latin evolved from Greek. Vico bases his method on a rationale that he does not always state, but which is indispensable to grasp. The core expression of this hypothesis is most probably in his 1710 treatise *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*:

Etymologies testify to the fact that a good and large part of the Latin language was imported among the Latins from the Ionians. It is further agreed that the Romans derived from the Etruscans the rites of their gods and, along with them also the sacred phrases and

⁵⁰ Marcel Danesi, *Vico, Metaphor, and the Origin of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1993), p. 64. Though it is clear what Danesi means by this adjective, it is not especially apt. For one thing, the first true “professional” philologists of Indo-European *Sprachlehre* such as Sir William Jones, Jakob Grimm, Carl Lachmann, and Franz Bopp, whose information was to be fuller (and conclusions sounder) than Vico’s, had yet to arrive on the scene. Also, the Professor of Rhetoric would certainly have found the term offensive.

priestly language. Therefore, I take it as certain that he learned origins of Latin words, from these two peoples. For this reason I have directed my attention to unearthing the most ancient Wisdom of the Italians from the etymologies of the Latin language itself. As far as I know, this is something no one has attempted hitherto, and perhaps it deserves to be numbered among Francis Bacon's desiderata.

Plato sought to unveil the ancient wisdom of the Greeks by the same method in his *Cratylus*. But the notable achievements of Varro in his *Origins*, Julius Scaliger in the *Causes of the Latin Language*, Franciscus Sanctius in *Minerva*, and Gaspar Scioppius in his *Notes* to that work are far removed from our undertaking here. These men busied themselves in unearthing the causes of language and in formulating it into a system on the basis of the philosophy to which they were devoted, and in which they were learned. Whereas I, not being an adherent of any school of thought, shall seek out the ancient Wisdom of the Italians from the very origins of their words.⁵¹

Concentrated in this one passage is a compelling bundle of notions that come together to inform my theories regarding Vico's Homer. First, there is his forthright, early, seminal statement confining his use of etymology to that of a tool for "unearthing" ancient wisdom to the Greco-Roman continuum, despite his frequent counter-claim that he is taking data from "universal history." This is my explanation for why other cultures, particularly the ancient Egyptians, occupy so much space in Vico's Chronological Table, but end up "taking a back seat" to the Greeks and Romans in his textual expansion. Essentially, his

⁵¹ *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians, Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language* [De antiquissima Itolorum sapientia ex linguae originibus eruenda libri tres], L.M. Palmer, translator (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press, 1988), p. 39-40.

knowledge of most world cultures was extremely removed from the empirical.

Burke puts it this way:

[Vico's] knowledge of other cultures was derived from relatively few sources. He learned of ancient Egypt, for example, from a few Classical sources, such as Herodotus, and a small number of works by seventeenth-century scholars. In a similar way, his picture of the Middle Ages was put together from a mere handful of modern studies or original texts. The texts did not, unfortunately, including the *Song of Roland*: it would be interesting to know whether Vico would have found in it doesn't limit see the attributed to Homer and Dante. He does in fact invoke the parallel with Homer in the case of "the history of Bishop Turpin of Paris, full of all those fables of the heroes of France called paladins which were later to fill so many romances and poems". . . [*Scienza Nuova*, Book II, 159]. As for the wider world, Vico knew it only as if it filtered through a small number of accounts by travellers and missionaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as the Spanish Jesuit Jose de Acosta (1540-1600) on Mexico and Peru, or the Italian Jesuit Martino Martini (1614-61) on China. (Ibid, p. 74)

Though the Kircher reference in §605 indicates a wider acquaintance with non-Classical sources than are listed here, Burke's citation of Herodotus combines nicely with the passage I have quoted from Plato's *Phaedrus* to persuade one that even Vico's cognizance of cultural variation was obtained through the gauze, so to speak, of the Classical authors.

Returning to *On the Most Ancient Wisdom*, we are also struck when Vico links etymology with an objective of obtaining certainty, which points to his consistent distinction between *il vero* and *il certo*, a which is in turn a covert response to Descartes. Meanwhile, the word "unearthing" comes from Francis

Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*. I consider this borrowing a variant of a concept that plays a huge role in his explication of Homer: namely, *discoverta*, "discovery," having the dual meaning of "encountering" and "recovering." Finally, Vico tells us exactly where the etymological method came from the first place. It is no accident that his etymologies are just as suspect and arbitrary as Plato's. The *Kratulos* is more than a general suggestion for a paradigm—it is a *muliggjørelse*. Also, notice that Vico immediately establishes a pedigree extending from Plato to Varro, making way for his obsession with triads.

The most amusing part of these remarks comes at the very end when he separates himself from other intellectuals by claiming that he is undertaking "things unattempted yet," to invoke Milton again. He implies that he is privy to knowledge of which the forebears he has named were either ignorant or somehow incapable; but we realize that his scope is not actually that much more circumspect or credible than theirs. Vico's assertion of privileged *sapienza*, which entails a strong oracular element, does considerable violence to his larger objective of treating history as a science. Yet it is utterly consistent with the bravura that stimulates him to undertake the *Scienza Nuova* to begin with.

Vico's at once credulous and guileful melding of Greece and Rome explains why he cites things that take place in the Homeric poems as reifications of his cultural theories. Here is a prime example from Book III:

§781 . . . [B]y his supreme strength Jove, in the fable of the great chain, that he is king of men and gods. On the basis of this vulgar opinion he makes it credible that Diomed can wound Venus and Mars with the help of Minerva, who, in the contest of the gods, despoils Venus and strikes Mars with the rock (and Minerva forsooth was the goddess of philosophy vulgar belief, and uses weapons so worthy of the wisdom of Jove!). . .

In such places, he uses Homer very much as Plato does in the Books III and X of the *Republic*—as a negative behavior model promoted by false confidence in poets as arbiters of character. One might expect Book III to continue this pattern, but I contend that it does not. Instead, Vico's *discoverta* (“discovery”/“uncovering”) of Homer looks backward from the Classical corpus *qua* literary record to a successive aggregation of preliterate bards. Book III thus undermines Book II in a palpable way. It signals a counter-movement against his early controlling instrumentation of literary *auctoritas*, as invoked through specific authors, and toward the construction of a sweeping overview of history-as-process. Accordingly, Vico grandiosely titles Book IV “The Courses the Nations Run.” In Books IV and V the references to Homer dwindle to scattered efforts to connect the synchronic, genius *ur*-Dante to the development of European institutions, mainly as filtered through Roman law, especially the Twelve Tables. Ironically, after Book III “Homer” reverts to the status of historical “indicator” that he has in Book II. As §915 discloses, the factor which best explains this reversion is Vico's poignant “belated” drive to have been

considered a well-qualified candidate for the Chair in Jurisprudence. *Yet I must emphasize that, even given this movement, Vico never expressly repudiates the paradigm of "Homer" as an Archaic succession of preliterate bards that appears in §877-§878.*

What is the motivation (cf. Schopenhauer, once again) behind the *Scienza nuova's* structure? I am far from being the first to suggest that it has a lot to do with Vico's *Angst* regarding his intellectual environment. There is considerable scholarship on Vico's consciousness of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy and science, and his desire to be taken seriously by his peers. For example, that Vico considered his own genius comparable to Sir Isaac Newton's explains why he sent a copy of the 1725 *Scienza Nuova* to Newton (1643-1727), and why he was devastated when he received no reply from the notoriously prickly Englishman. More important, Vico's desolation in the Newton anecdote can help us understand his unflagging battle against Descartes' expressly anti-historical rationalism. An expeditious way of revealing Vico's passionate consciousness of Descartes is to quote from the opening remarks in Part One of the 1637 *Discours de la Méthode*:

. . . [J]e croyais avoir déjà donné assez de temps aux langues, et même aussi à la lecture des livres anciens, et à leurs histoires, et à leurs fables. Car c'est quasi le même de converser avec ceux des autres siècles que de voyager. Il est bon de savoir quelque chose des

mœurs de divers peuples, afin de juger des nôtres plus sainement, et que nous ne pensions pas que tout ce qui est contre nos modes soit ridicule et contre raison, ainsi qu'ont coutume de faire ceux qui n'ont rien vu. Mais lorsqu'on emploie trop de temps à voyager, on devient enfin étranger en son pays; et lorsqu'on est trop curieux des choses qui se pratiquaient aux siècles passés, on demeure ordinairement fort ignorant de celles qui se pratiquent en celui-ci. . .

J'estimais fort l'éloquence, et j'étais amoureux de la poésie; mais je pensais que l'une et l'autre étaient des dons de l'esprit plutôt que des fruits de l'étude.

(“. . . I thought I had already devoted enough time to languages, and also to reading the ancient books, and their histories, and their fables. [Cf. the Vico quote on the title page] For it is almost the same thing to converse with people of other centuries as it is to travel. It is good to know something about the customs of diverse peoples, in order to judge our own more rationally, and so that we won't think that everything is foreign to our ways is ridiculous or unreasonable, such as those who have never seen anything are in the habit of doing. But when one takes too much time traveling, one ends up a stranger in one's own country; and when one becomes too curious about how things were done in ages past, one ordinarily lives in great ignorance of how things are done in this one. . . .

I greatly admired eloquence, and I was enchanted by poetry. But I thought that these were gifts of nature rather than fruits of study. . . .” [my translation])

In this dense passage, Descartes happens to furnish Vico with an entire mode of discourse, and hence with much of the lexicon that we find in the *Scienza Nuova*. I have underlined seeds of ideas that Vico appears to have extracted deliberately from his avowed epistemological rival; one cannot emphasize too strongly that here at the very beginning of justifying his “method” Descartes explicitly *rejects* several elements of his youthful education that will, ironically,

form the basis of Vico's theories, particularly those relating to popular cultures, Classical eloquence, and the *auctoritas* of Antiquity. Descartes does so on the grounds that this traditional knowledge cannot, *ex privilegio naturæ* (invoking Coleridge as quoted above), yield legitimate "fruits of (scientific) study." Looking at it from the opposite direction, Vico the *filólogo* warmly embraces Descartes' jettisoned "langues, et . . . la lecture des livres anciens, et . . . leurs histoires, et . . . leurs fables" as tools for approximating Newtonian empirical principles. While it is a tried and true convention to accept *prima facie* the diametrically anti-Cartesian rhetoric that activates Vico's epistemology, no exegete I have read has argued—as I do now—that Vico consciously and ebulliently adopts the specific lexis of Descartes' "refuse-pile." (For a pivotal example of Vico's ironic appropriation strategy—i.e., his Cartesian shading of *gentile* as "*païen* / pagan,"—see the end of Appendix One.) In essence, Vico combines Newton's empirical spirit with phenomena Descartes systematically discredits.

In other words, as one might expect of a Professor of Rhetoric, Vico's "science" is heavily "rhetorical." Harold Bloom, in acknowledging the Vichian element in his own thought, has recognized the central role rhetoric plays in Vico's pre-Romantic emphasis on *fantasia*:

As the great instrument of self-preservation, the Vichian imagination [cf. *fantasia*] is at once a composite of Freud's "mechanisms of defense" and all of the tropes described by ancient rhetoricians. Eloquence is thus self-preservation through persuasion,

and the imagination can do anything because self-preservation makes us giants and heroes and magical, primitive formalists again.⁵²

Unlike Bloom, I do not see Vico's reliance on his knowledge of traditional rhetorical theory merely as a case of Hobbesian "self-preservation." True, his position as Professor of Latin Eloquence at the University of Naples was "bottom-wrung"; and it is well-documented that he actively sought the prestigious Chair in Jurisprudence, and was devastated that he did not get it. (As I shall argue in detail in my conclusion, understanding this autobiographical theme is the key to connecting Vico's apparently anomalous Homer theory with the *Scienza Nuova* as a whole.) Vico's knowledge of the ancient Greek and Roman authors represents more than an avenue for a subconscious Freudian "vindication of the Self," as Bloom claims. A time-honored framework for philology, the Classical corpus provided Vico with a weapon against unwarranted Cartesian confidence in the *a priori*. Hence, rhetorical figures, etymologies, and citations from Classical sources generally function in Vico's expositions as quasi-empirical *mímēsēs* of fact. At the same time, Vico often treats the Homeric giants and heroes—taken *as literary figures*—quite scornfully, much in the way Plato does in Book X of the *Republic*. One can interpret this monitory tone toward Homer's

⁵² *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975; rpt., with a new Preface, 2003), pp. 67-68.

heroes as reflecting his ultimate *télos* of promoting his own version of a contractarian legal theory.

This is not to say that Vico's proto-ethnographic approach to Homer in Book III is not genuinely "ahead of its time," since it foretokens the central tenet the "Parry-Lord Hypothesis" (i.e., that "Homer" was a cultural institution rather than a figure) by almost 200 years. It is vital to concede this difference in Vico's idea from other, slightly later theories that superficially resemble it. For example, Anne Dacier, who in making her pioneering translation, still thought of Homer as an aspect of "la Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes," which was first and foremost a *literary* controversy with no real archeological component. Given, Robert Wood in his 1769 "Essay on the Original Genius of Homer and his Writings" does characterize Homer as "unlettered." Wood's conception is, in effect, a forerunner of both Heinrich Schliemann's romanticized, notoriously preconception-ridden archeology and Milman Parry's comparative method so deeply indebted to Meillet. For Wood actually got up an expedition to the Mediterranean in search of "the true Ancients." One result was Wood's "Essay," which, far from being the result of anything actually witnessed, is basically a response to the Scottish Primitivist mania stimulated by the putative Celtic oral bard Ossian, James Macpherson's *literary* hoax perpetrated in the early 1760's,

years after Vico's death. It is probably under this influence that Wood sees Homer as an individualized "Original Genius" with an encyclopedic store of "autochthonous" wisdom, as it were; one should bear in mind, however, that the Classical corpus encourages much the same image of Homer. Evidence that Wood found his stimulus from these Greek and Roman authorities as well comes from his dependence on the "lives of Homer" as a compass.⁵³

One can defend aligning Vico with these "pre-Romantics" because he maintains that Homer is best conceived as the product of a tradition, a *succession* of singers. This is more than a glib coincidence. Vico has long received "lip-service" concerning this innovation from those who have sought to revamp "The Homeric Question" into a primarily ethnographic one. For example, in his historical survey of Homer theories that serves as an introduction to his father Milman's collected papers, Adam Parry offers a perfunctory acknowledgment of Vico's divergence from other, perhaps more prominent voices:

[Vico] was with d'Aubignac on the matter that there was no such man. But this assumption led him to a judgement very different from d'Aubignac's, a judgement at once more romantic and more deeply historical. He declared that the Homeric poems were the creation not of one man, but of a whole people, and that they owed

⁵³ For the foregoing brief account of various pre-Romantic" Homer theories, I summarize the material in Kirsti Simonsuuri's indispensable survey *Homer's original genius: Eighteenth-century notions of the early Greek epic (1688-1798)*, Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1979), pp. .

their greatness to that origin.⁵⁴

As far as it goes, Adam Parry's thumbnail praise is accurate; but he includes it more as a singular epiphany than as a hypothesis intended to generate a theoretical framework. In so doing, he reflects conventional treatments such as that of Wilamowitz in his famous 1921 survey *Geschichte der Philologie*. Such an off-handed mention reinforces the criticism that Vico's thought, while occasionally transcendent, chronically lacks empirical support, despite his anti-Cartesian plan. It also exposes an obstacle that reprises an old problem. In their "Introduction" to the Second Edition of Albert B. Lord's *Singer of Tales*, Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy comment about Adam Parry's own idea of his father's work that may give a clue, albeit indirect, as to why Parry *files* gives Vico such short shrift:

Adam Parry tends to detach his father's work from Lord's and attach it instead to the work of Classicists who resist the comparison of South Slavic traditions with Homer. According to Adam Parry, "not the slightest proof has yet appeared that the texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as we have them, or any substantial connected portion of these texts, were composed by oral improvisation of the kind observed and described by Parry and Lord and others in Yugoslavia and elsewhere." He finds it "quite conceivable" that "Homer made use of writing to compose a poem in a style which had been developed by an oral tradition."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *The Making of Homeric Verse*, Adam Perry ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. xiii.

⁵⁵ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), p. xvi.

Following this train of thought, my suggestion is that Milman's Parry's earliest, "pre-South-Slavic" work on Homer, which is confined to issues stimulated by *prima facie* texts, probably influenced Adam toward giving undue weight to his father's original role as a Classical philologist. It is not unreasonable to postulate that Adam's wish to place his father in a scholarly genealogy including such giants of textual study as Wilamowitz, Mommsen, Housman, et al. might also cause him to de-emphasize the revolution in comparative ethnography that has won Milman acclaim. This view might go toward explaining why, as Mitchell and Nagy indicate, Adam seems to minimize A.B. Lord's faithful continuation of Milman's ethnography. I stress that the passage just quoted exposes a crucial flaw in Adam's thinking: to wit, that the Parry-Lord Hypothesis developed primarily as a means of dealing with "texts" instead of the cultural traditions of which they are vestiges. He is thus imposing the same restriction to "text" that has plagued "The Homeric Question" since it was first raised. Actually, the Parry-Lord Hypothesis frees the investigator from any one "text," emphasizing instead the value of cultural comparisons. Thus Mitchell and Nagy make a point of criticizing Adam Parry's rejection of ethnographic comparison as a useful tool:

The comparative methods of Parry and Lord are closely connected to the *méthode comparative* of Antoine Meillet [I]n his Introduction to his father's work, Adam Parry discounts the

influence of Meillet. Indeed, . . . he generally discounts the comparative aspects of Milman Parry's methodology. By contrast, *The Singer of Tales* continues and extends Parry's comparative approaches. . . . (p. xvii)

Vico's "Discoverta" should naturally appeal to those who, like Milman Parry, A.B. Lord, Gregory Nagy, *et al.*, seek the early Homeric oral performer behind the later recorder. From this perspective, scrutiny of the *Scienza Nuova* as a whole brings much more credit to Vico as a forerunner of modern Homer theories than Adam Parry's nebulous reference I quote above allows. Hence, Mitchell and Nagy indirectly leave a space for Vico as a precursor of the modern oral-evolutionary Homeric paradigm:

What distinguished [Milman] Parry from most earlier Classicists who posed the "Homeric Question" was not only the hypothesis that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were originally the products of an oral tradition that was older than any written literature; it was also his formulation of a method for *testing* this hypothesis, a discovery procedure [*nota bene!*] capable of moving the debate from the content of orally produced songs to the actual process through which such songs are produced in performance. (p. xx)

The qualifying word "most" hints at Vico's unique prescience. Note, by the way, that it would be wrong to think of Vico as a "Classicist" in the sense Mitchell and Nagy mean here, even though he was Professor of Latin Eloquence. In any case, I assert that Mitchell's and Nagy's "hypothesis that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were originally the products of an oral tradition that was older than any written literature" perfectly encompasses Vico's model in Book III. This is not to say that

Vico accomplished anything resembling the second element of *testing* that Mitchell and Nagy require, for the simple reason that he was no field archeologist. Yet to the extent that he employed etymology and mythography to combat what he saw as the chronic error of anti-phenomenological Cartesianism, he was moving in the direction of modern linguistically based comparative ethnography.

As I broached earlier, the manifest paradox in Vico's framework stems from his reliance on the authority of the very same literary Classical corpus that his "Discovery" ostensibly permits him to supersede. Indeed, it is the same oxymoronic bugbear that haunts Wood's title "Essay on the Original Genius of Homer *and his Writings* [my emphasis]."

Confining one's study of the *Scienza Nuova* to Book III promotes the impression that Vico has succeeded in rejecting the model of Homer that he has received from the Quarrel. Yet he never goes so far as to repudiate the testimony of the Classical corpus. On this basis, I contend that Book III is also "pre-paradigmatic," for despite Vico's determination to "discover" a proto-anthropological, pre-literate Homer, he is also subject to the vagaries of rhetorical convenience.

While he does not acknowledge it, Vico's analytical problem is something over which he has little control: again, he has very little empirical data in the

sense that Parry, Lord, Nagy, *et al.*—or even Robert Wood and F.A. Wolf—do. I reiterate that the image Vico presents of multiple illiterate bards performing in an ancient, chronological, preliterate tradition stakes out the basic framework of most present-day hypotheses *without* very much supporting ethnographic material.

Vico's "pre-paradigm" is evidence that it is possible to construe that he is actually operating Kuhn's "model for models" in reverse. After Book III, his references to Homer become quite infrequent. In my view, this is not because his ideas of how the poems may have been composed were a "prolegomenon" to later arguments. Rather, I believe that "theory" concerning Homer virtually "disappears" in Books Four and Five because Vico feels he has already made his case on a subject that was *de rigueur* for an early eighteenth-century *filólogo* (in other words, a would-be participant in the Quarrel), and he now wishes to devote his energies to explicating the subject that ultimately interests him most—that is, his tripartite *ricorsi* model for the evolution of European cultural history. This direction is set in what I interpret as Vico's ironically *faux*-Cartesian axiomatic propositions in earlier parts of the *Scienza Nuova*.

Originally, I intended to confine my subject to Vico. As my argument developed, however, I realized that his ideas are also extremely interesting in the

context of his own times. His place in the “Quarrel” is singular, for even while he strives hard to set himself apart from other early eighteenth-century theories and the traditions from which they emerge, he is nonetheless beholden to them. To elaborate upon this dilemma, I must briefly go over some familiar ground. The Homeric Question considered specifically as a major sub-category of the Quarrel took two basic forms: (a) Who were the “better” poets—Homer and Vergil, or Shakespeare and Racine? and, more pertinently to Vico’s views, (b) By positing this attested voice “Homer,” exactly whom—or again, “what”—and when are we talking about? The latter formulation can also serve as the broadest framework of current competing evolutionary paradigms.

There is a good reason to place Vico’s model in the context of the pan-European forms of Homeric Question: he is contemporary with major participants like Anne Dacier, Alexander Pope, and Richard Bentley, yet teleologically (as his arguments throughout the *Scienza Nuova* disclose) he remains apart from them. Evidence of this is the impossibility—nay, the *uselessness*—of trying to establish whether we should see Vico as a “Separatist / Analyst” or a “Unitarian.” The result has been a general impression that Vico was somehow isolated from the European discourse on Homer, one which Vico himself believed and promoted. In developing my general approach to bringing this divergence into sharper focus, I have chosen to compare Vico’s “Homeric

problems” (echoing diction used by, among others, Aristotle,—in a lost work—and Nagy) with those of his English Augustan contemporaries Bentley and Pope. A fruitful tactic has been to differentiate these participants in the Quarrel according to their objectives. Bentley was a pioneering, if overconfident, critic of the Homeric “text,” while Pope’s translation of the *Iliad*, a work frequently condemned on various grounds through several revolutions in taste, had at least one incontrovertible virtue: it made him rich. These men are linked in English literary history because Bentley accused Pope of having no business attempting a translation in the first place, on the grounds, as Bentley reputedly said to Pope’s face, “you know nothing of” Greek (see below, p. 36). Their “quarrel within ‘the Quarrel’” highlights yet another beguiling problem: determining whether a pedant like Bentley, who pretends to a superior knowledge of the “original language” actually has the high ground. Unlike Vico, who has no palpable interest in translations of Homer, Bentley is at once irritated by Pope’s success and spurred on to emulate him with a “version” (i.e., “translation”) of his own, a project Bentley never finished.

The simultaneity of these three quite exclusive perspectives provides an interesting way of interpreting the dichotomy of “Homer as cultural memory” versus “Homer as authoritative record.” A digression from Vico’s theories *per se* will allow me to expose another issue that the Quarrel’s often strident aesthetic

logomachy obscures. One of the causes of the gulf between the respective champions of the Ancients and Moderns is, for want of a euphonious word, an encroaching “Greeklessness.” As already noted, the petard upon which Bentley hoists Pope entails Bentley’s confidence in his sound knowledge of the “original Greek.” This aspersion is ironic, because the Homer available to Bentley, conceptually as well as literally, is a “synchronic” text. True, Bentley expresses a fervent skepticism regarding textuality with his exhortation in the Preface of his 1711 edition of Horace: “Noli itaque Librarios solos venerari; sed per te sapere aude.” (“Do not, therefore, venerate the copyists only; but dare to know through your own capacities.” My translation.) With the exiguous “per te” Bentley expropriates to the Self Horace’s taciturn motto “sapere aude” (*Epistle* 1.2.40), making it a permutation of the Delphic ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ, “Know thyself.” In this context “sed per te sapere aude” must be expanded to “but be daring enough to trust your own intellect.” This interpretation fits well with of the generally intuitive character of Bentley’s emendations. His perspective has a definite “pre-Romantic” tinge to it; thus it is no accident that Kant uses Horace’s maxim in Bentley’s sense in his seminal 1784 essay “*Beantwortung der Frage, Was ist Aufklärung?*” (“Answer to the Question, What is Enlightenment?”).⁵⁶ Glenn W.

⁵⁶ “*Sapere aude!* Habe Mut dich deines eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen! ist . . . der Wahlspruch der Aufklärung.” (“*Dare to know!* Have the courage to trust the counsel of your own Understanding! is . . . the byword of the Enlightenment.” (my translation)

Most has made the following edifying comment about the diachronic hermeneutics of Horace's injunction:

In Horace, it is directed against intellectual sloth which would delay his friend's (and by implication his reader's) decision to study moral philosophy and live rightly; in Bentley, against scholars' blind veneration of manuscript readings simply because they are old; in Kant, against the self-indulgence of any mature rational being who prefers to defer to the intelligence of others decisions he is capable resolving itself.⁵⁷

What Bentley actually thought happened for such texts to have been produced is difficult to know, even given his celebrated discovery of the digamma's function. Bentley's understanding of the available text itself was that it is the work of a literate compiler, not a rhapsode. As he himself remarks, "these loose songs were not collected together in the form of an Epic Poem til *Pisistratus's* time, about 500 years after [Homer]."⁵⁸ On the strength of this declaration, one should properly classify Bentley as a convinced Separatist.

One of the ancillary positions I take in this paper is that the common notion that either Vico or Pope was "Greekless" by today's standards is largely the result of propaganda. Both of them had Greek tutors when they were young, and reflect some knowledge of the language in their works. As Steven

⁵⁷ "Classical scholarship and literary criticism." *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume 4: The Eighteenth Century*, H.B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson, eds. p. 743.

⁵⁸ Quoted in C.O. Brink, *English Classical Scholarship: Historical Reflections on Bentley, Porson, and Housman* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 1986), pp. 75-76.

Shankman argues, Pope was consistently more accurate than his predecessor Chapman in conveying Homeric semantic equivalencies. And although Vico refers to characters from Greco-Roman *mūthos* by their Italian names, he often cites Greek authors and occasionally quotes in Greek. I have taken pains to argue for their relative competency in Greek—against common assumptions—in order to mark out the difference between Vico’s perspective on Homer and those of figures coming half a century or so later. This general conceptual shift was not a question of accuracy; in fact, it constituted a virtual repudiation of that criterion. Ironically, it was the English Romantics’ rebellion against the idea that poets, to fit worthily into the tradition, must have Greek and Latin that influenced them to laud Chapman’s translation over Pope’s.

This English Romantic contrariness, which sometimes, as in William Blake’s case, reaches the level of revolutionary zeal, provides one with an avenue for highlighting differences between literary reactions against the Homer of the Quarrel and Vico’s unstable, though paradoxically confident, proto-ethnographic paradigm. Accordingly, I have found it useful within my argument to digress still further, toward aesthetic modulations that developed after the heyday of the Quarrel. As counter-examples to Vico, I shall consider selected English Romantic conceptions of Homer. Programmatic Romanticism represents a cognitive, highly deliberate metastasis toward a basic image of Homer as an oral

poet. Yet this new image cannot be considered a truly Vichian archetype as he delineates Homer in Book III; for the English Romantics almost always classify Homer as the chief (re)source of the *English literary* tradition. Thus, to the extent that the English Romantic Homer is the iconic mythological source of all subsequent poetic inspiration (embodied especially in Shakespeare and Milton), he is static, non-multiple, and so just as “synchronic” in a sense as the textual Homers of previous eras.

As one avenue for amplifying upon the English Romantic (i.e., “post-Vichian”) semiotics of Homer, I shall focus at one juncture on the program outlined in Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s 1798 “Advertisement” to the *Lyrical Ballads*. It contains a formal aesthetic element through which the two men intend to give their “experiment” immediate credibility. In order to promote the famous elements of their project that convey an aesthetic intention of creating of a new poetry that is by turns conversational, bucolic, “supernatural” and hence superficially radical, the “Advertisement” condemns the practice of writing poetry according to “pre-established codes of decision.” The rationale behind this “anti-self-conscious” attempt at what amounts to an aesthetic substitution is essentially to “certify” the famous phrase “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.” I contend that “spontaneous overflow” reflects Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s deep-seated admiration of “recomposition in performance” as figures

like Herder, Rousseau, and Macpherson, and Blair had “discovered” it in preliterate European cultures. At the same time, I stress that the two poet-theorists demonstrate the viability of my themes of limitation and ambiguity, since “spontaneous overflow” is followed immediately by “recollected in tranquility.” This tension gives a clue as to why, as I shall demonstrate, Coleridge’s opinion of “Homer” is so surprisingly negative.

My conclusion summarizes the Homeric “oral versus written” polarity as a problem related to the fact that poetry is ultimately a form of synchronic communication. In the history of the “Homeric Question” there is an often underappreciated amount of agreement that “Homer” actually *was* a tradition of oral poets in some sense. As to the Homeric corpus specifically, the contradictory sticking point that today we have only a relatively unified literary “Homer” from which to begin working has complicated matters in at least two ways:

(1) The greater part of what have as indirect external evidence of the Homeric epics as “re-compositions-in-performance” comes from the oral traditions that are still viable, such as those that have been studied in the Balkans, Central Asia, and Africa. In addition, there are various forms of internal evidence—e.g., the *oidoi* Demodokos and Phormios in the *Odyssey*, and dialectical variegation reflecting Panhellenic diachrony. And then there is the

archaeological record, which lends framing support. In and of itself, this empirical evidence is arguably enough to render the Parry-Lord Hypothesis credible.

(2) The literary “ontogeny” that the Homeric epics have undergone naturally (and somewhat unfortunately) encourages analyses that focus on issues pertaining to “textuality,” such as plot and character. This categorical, synchronizing oversimplification tends to happen no matter how hard a given analyst may be trying to maintain respect for the oral-evolutionary model. Ironically, the compulsion to do so obscures—even from those who read Greek—the Panhellenic, “multiform” origins of these poems. This principle explains perfectly how it is that Vico can envision what we have as “Homer” as manifesting the collective vestiges of an oral tradition in Book III of the *Scienza Nuova* after he has already used “Homer” as a historical “authority” in Book II. It also illuminates the psychology behind the readiness Powell, West, et al. exhibit to arrest the evolution of Homeric poetry through the development of an alphabet and the training of recording “Adapters.”

As a way of reaching an Aristotelian mean between “the oral” and “the written,” I propose adapting through analogy the principle identified in research done between 1915 and 1925 by the Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin as “figure-ground alternation.” This term refers to the perceptual phenomenon in which

certain integrated patterns presented to the visual field present two mutually exclusive interpretations, which means, by extension, that they cannot be perceived both ways at once. The analogy I am proposing begins with the idea that the “figure” becomes the synchronic written form of the epic, while the “ground” represents the tradition in which any one written manifestation of the epic is placed for consideration. Albert B. Lord’s oxymoronic term “oral literature” is evidence that his theories essentially recognize this paradox: that is, to the extent that a written text *conceals* a diachronic evolution, it cannot be considered truly adequate to represent an *oral* tradition. yet one cannot deny the epics’ *literatur’nost’* as reflected in their synchronic narrative unity and other literary affinities.

And there is a further utility to the analogy. It provides a way to formalize the corollary that, at the same time as the concealment is going on, it is also true that the audience is, at some level, today fully aware that there was a tradition that brought about the circumstances of the concealment. This aspect of “figure-ground alternation” makes particular sense if we take the need for translation into account. To give one example, many Classics scholars have especially commended the Richmond Lattimore’s translations of the *Iliad* and the

Odyssey because they more or less successfully⁵⁹ “mime” features of the Homeric Greek, thus conveying a more “accurate” sense of the impact, if you will, of the vestigially Panhellenic, mainly Aeolic-Ionic dactylic hexameter. There is another factor implicit in this paradox, that being what I call “interference.” To the extent that any one translation of Homer reflects the prosodic traditions of the language into which it has been translated, those traditions interfere with the cognition that the experience of the epics in Greek is intuitively much closer to what it must have been like to hear the *aoidoi*. To epitomize how interference operates, I observe that in the Renaissance, the aesthetic *télos* of translation was neither to “disseminate” the essence of a Classical text nor to create an “original” independent masterpiece, but rather to accomplish “successfully” the recasting of a Greek or Latin work within the separate linguistic and prosodic constraints of the vernacular. This principle is the basis of complaints by Bentley, Coleridge, and other receivers of the “Homeric Question” who, express dissatisfaction with Pope’s popular translation. Ergo Bentley’s “It is a pretty poem, Mr. Pope, but you must not call it Homer.” The Postmodern version of this question is whether the current acceptance of the “oral-evolutionary” paradigm has actually brought us that much closer to allaying the ambiguity that Vico’s Homer displays.

⁵⁹ “Successful” is one way to convey Aristotle’s formal aesthetic purposive use of *kalós*. Cf. W.W. Fyfe’s translation of Aristotle’s conditional clause in the *Poetics* at 1447b10, *ei mēllei kalōs exein he poiēsis*, as “if the poem is to be a success.”

Chapter One:

VICO'S *DE NOSTRI* AS A PROLEGOMENON TO HIS "DISCOVERY"
OF HOMER

This opening chapter focuses on Vico's Seventh Inaugural Oration (delivered 1708, published 1709), entitled *De nostri temporis Studiorum Ratione* (*On the Study Methods of Our Time*), and generally known simply as the *De nostri*. My intent is to construct a framework for understanding Vico's motivations (cf. Schopenhauer) for reacting against Descartes' epistemology as the Frenchman sets it out in *Discours de la méthode*. Doing this will in turn show how Vico's determination to create an epistemology that allows him to "mirror" the "method of doubt" which Descartes developed, a paradigm dependent upon skepticism toward *auctoritas* based on anything having to do with history, *poiesis*, or ancient mathematical and logical forms. In its place, Vico was just developing a "method" of his own based on models provided by ancient history, poetry, rhetorical theory, and jurisprudence—most of which Descartes rejected. In the Seventh Oration, these conflicting interpretations of what is the proper "method" to obtain knowledge of the "truth" are "triggered" semiotically by *probabilis verisimilisque* (Vico) and *Critica* (Descartes).

In the “Introduction” to his translation of the *De nostri*, Elio Gianturco has admirably summarized the circumstances under which Vico performed his annual task:

In compliance with a custom at the University of Naples that the professor of rhetoric deliver the address solemnizing the opening of each new school year, Vico, who had been the incumbent in that professorship since 1698, was invited in 1708 to give the “inaugural” speech at that ceremony, to which the presence of the Viceroy of Naples and of Cardinal Vincenzo Grimani lent particular luster. As his topic, Vico chose to compare the study methods of classical antiquity with those of his epoch. He revised and enlarged the address in 1709, and it was printed in that year at the University’s expense. It is the seventh in the series of his “inaugurals,” the six preceding having been delivered during the period from October 18, 1699, to October 18, 1707. The *De nostri* was the only one that was deemed worthy of appearing in print. It is the most outstanding of Vico’s academic productions, and epitomizes his educational ideas. . . . Fausto Nicolini, the *doyen* of Vico studies, aptly underlines its significance by pointing out that “it is the most important pedagogic essay between Locke’s *Thoughts on Education* (1693) and the *Émile* (1762) of Rousseau.”¹

The thrust of the Inaugural Orations is “protreptic.” This word is from the Greek *protrépō*, “to urge forward.” Vico consistently sees his charge as Professor of Latin Eloquence as being exhort the students to achieve erudition both in the new experimental sciences and in the classic modes of expression and persuasion at the highest level possible:

¹ Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, Elio Gianturco, translator. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. xxii. Where it is instructive, I shall be interpolating Vico’s Latin.

[Y]oung men should be taught the totality of sciences and arts [my emphasis]: and their intellectual powers should be developed to the full: thus they will become familiar with the art of argument, drawn from the *ars topica*. (p. 19)

Vico feels that his specific duty as a teacher of “eloquence” is to sustain the integrity of traditional disciplines as vessels of knowledge or wisdom (*scientia / sapientia*) rooted in antiquity—primarily rhetoric, history, and jurisprudence—that he felt had been eroding since the ascendancy of Newtonian physics and Cartesian standards of truth. He sets out his rationale in a way that shows him to be a first-class educator with the long-range interests of his students in mind:

[W]hosoever intends to devote his efforts, not to physics or mechanics, but to a political career, whether as a civil servant or any member of the legal profession or of the judiciary, a political speaker or a pulpit orator, should not waste too much time in his adolescence on those subjects which are taught by abstract geometry. Let him, instead, cultivate his mind with an ingenious method: let him study topics, and defend both sides of the controversy, let it be on nature, man, or politics, in a freer and brighter style of expression. (*ibid.*)

Vico is talking about practicalities here. Not every young man is going to become a natural philosopher (that is, a “physicist”), mathematician, or epistemologist. The Cartesian method is of little use in developing the skills young men will need to become successful politicians, civil servants, “pulpit orators,” and jurists.

Here I feel compelled to digress in order to amplify my point. To provide the proper context for Vico's specific mention here of these professions associated with the social order, one must never lose sight of the fact that, even during the earliest stages of his intellectual development, he is obsessed with jurisprudence. Later in the *De nostri* (p. 62), Vico observes the following about the history of the various uses of law in the evolving Italian culture. I shall analyze the passage piece-by-piece, as it were:

We must . . . count as an advantage the fact that the professions of legal expert and orator are, in our age, joined in the same person, even in cases where factual matters are predominant. In early Rome, jurist and orator were distinct. Consequently, in cases of fact the modern lawyer can be more authoritative, whereas in those of law he can be more eloquent. But this advantage is offset by the fact that the science of threefold law, once unitary, have today been dismembered into three distinct disciplines: ecclesiastical (or canon) law, public, and private law. Ecclesiastical and private law which, in the past, were offshoots of public law, are now severed both from public law and from each other. Canon law is the exclusive realm of theologians and ecclesiastics; members of the governmental councils monopolize private law only.

To begin with, I find it curious that Vico claims that at one time in Roman →Italian civilization the jurist and the orator were separate professions, given that his favorite paradigmatic figure in classical Roman culture is arguably Cicero, whose oral defenses stand even today as masterpieces of juridical persuasion. (Perhaps in this passage Vico is referring elliptically to *pre-Classical* Rome.) Furthermore, it does not seem to be at all “consequent,” as Vico says, that

there should have been in his day a recognized strategic division between arguing the facts relating to a case and having command of the legal precedent that places those facts in a plausible context. What Vico is really getting at, I think, is that the power of the lawyer's "eloquence" derives from the special form of the syllogism, the Aristotelian/Ciceronian enthymeme, which manifests itself in the *De nostri* in the phrase *probabilis verisimilisque*, which translates as "probable and similar to (a/the) truth." Bear in mind that, as I shall explicate later, the enthymeme, while actually an *a priori* logical form, has traditionally been considered a strategy suitable for public oratory on the grounds that "the probable" is almost as unassailable technically as a proper deductive syllogism that admits of no induction.

In any event, Vico suggests that the difference between "the ancient" and "the modern" came about with the gradual dissolution of a unified pre-republican Roman legal system into three distinct areas of specialization: ecclesiastical, governmental, and private law. The vital thing to notice about this separation is that it documents that Vico's mania for the tripartite emerged remarkably early. Here, he welds together (permanently, as it turns out) the two most eminent and perdurable components of his theories of cultural change: jurisprudence as a primary matrix of social order in Europe throughout history, and the indomitable "tripartite rule." **No other principle in Vico trumps these**

two. And the most fascinating thing to about them is how early they become galvanized in his thought. For these principles are not the result of years of contemplation and revision, Rather, they are inviolable first principles. My study will rely heavily on these two Vichian principles.

To resume my general explication, the *ars topica*, or *Topics*, is the specific rhetorical tool Vico proposes as a counterpart (cf. Aristotle's metaphoric word in his *Rhetoric* at 1354a1, *antístrophe*, "countermovement," such as performed both kinetically and dramatically by the Chorus in Attic tragedy) to Cartesian *Critica*, which Gianturco expands to "philosophical criticism." Vico's use of the *ars topica* is a resuscitation from ancient and medieval logic, which for Aristotle is a form whose objective is to argue for or demonstrate probability rather than to require certainty in the conclusion, and which Cicero adapts from Aristotle as a method of applying written Roman jurisprudential custom as it was intended to be applied, i.e., casuistically.² As Vico says:

² To give an illustration, I quote from Cicero's *Topica*:

[13] A genere sic ducitur: Quoniam argentum omne mulieri legatum est, non potest ea pecunia quae numerata domi relicta est non esse legata; forma enim a genere, quoad suum nomen retinet, nunquam seiungitur, numerata autem pecunia nomen argenti retinet; legata igitur videtur.

An argument is derived from the kind of word, thus: "Since all the money has been bequeathed to the woman, it is impossible that ready money which was left in the house should not have been bequeathed. For the species is never separated from the genus as long as it retains its name: but ready money retains the name of money: therefore it is plain that it

Let him not spurn reasons that wear a semblance of probability and verisimilitude [*et quod probabilius verisimiliusque in rebus sit, amplectatur*]. Let our efforts not be directed towards achieving superiority over the Ancients merely in the field of science, while they surpass us in wisdom; let us not being merely more exact and more true than the Ancients; while allowing them to be more eloquent than we are; let us equal the Ancients in the fields of wisdom and eloquence [*sapientia, & eloquentia*] as we excel them in the domain of science [*scientia*].

It is instructive to concentrate for the moment on Vico's Latin phrase *probabilius verisimiliusque*. Literally, it means "more probable and more like the truth."

Several times in the *De nostri* Vico uses this virtual pleonasm when referring to the Aristotelian enthymeme. If we expand it semantically, we can construct the following gloss: "Something that is 'probable' may not be 'true' in the sense that it can be judged 'certain' after having been subjected to systematic Cartesian doubt; but it *is* "true" to the extent that, given the limits of one's knowledge of the circumstances that may have brought it about, it is *supremely plausible* in the context in which it appears."

was bequeathed."

This passage exemplifies several aspects of what I am describing. First, it is a fine instance of the *ars topica* as Cicero applied it to civil law. Second, it demonstrates how the special syllogism known as the enthymeme can be used to formulate "if-then" and "since-therefore" statements that have the flexibility to be indispensable in case law.

Finally, Vico's attraction to Cicero's common jurisprudential implementation of the *ars topica* provides yet more evidence of Vico's enduring obsession with jurisprudence.

Meanwhile, Vico's frequent use of *Critica* in the Seventh Oration reflects his need to keep reminding his audience that he is attempting to establish a system that operates according to a new *scientia rationalis* that will be as rigorous in its own way as those of his avowed model Francis Bacon and implicit rival Descartes. A sustained passage in this vein is the following:

Just as old age [*senectus*; cf. Cicero's *De senectute*] is powerful in reason, so adolescence in imagination [*phantasia*; Italian cognate *fantasia*]. Since imagination [*fantas*] has always been esteemed a most favorable omen of future development, it should in no way be dulled. Furthermore, the teacher should give the greatest care to the cultivation of the pupil's memory [*memoria*], which, though not exactly the same as imagination, is almost identical with it. In adolescence, memory outstrips in vigor all other faculties, and should be intensely trained. Youth's natural inclination to the arts in which imagination or memory (or a combination of both) is prevalent (such as painting, poetry, oratory, jurisprudence) should by no means be blunted. Nor should advanced philosophical criticism, the common instrument today of all arts and sciences, being an impediment to any of them. The Ancients knew how to avoid this drawback. In almost all their schools for youths, the role of logic was fulfilled by geometry. Following the example of medical practitioners, and concentrate their efforts on seconding the bent of Nature, the Ancients, required their youths to learn the science of geometry which cannot be grasped without a vivid capacity to form images. Thus, without doing violence to [N]ature, but gradually and gently and in step with the mental capacities of their age, the Ancients nurtured the reasoning powers of their young men. (*De nostri*, pp. 13-14)

This passage is a treasure-trove of concepts that remain consistent in Vico's thought from his early academic orations all the way through to the last edition of the *Scienza nuova*. Understanding the order of his argument is crucial. First,

Vico refers to the faculties that reside in varying proportions within all youthful, developing minds of *phantasia* and *memoria*, which Vico holds to be “almost identical.” Vico states that reason (*ratio*) comes with the experience of age, and gradually replaces *phantasia* / *memoria* as the primary dynamo of individual thought. Note, however, that while making this fairly conventional argument, Vico also tries to have it both ways, in a sense. On the one hand, he holds that training in the humanities should be “intense,” in order to take advantage of the fact that younger minds in particular are predisposed to absorbing large amounts of information. At the same time, he realizes that he must acknowledge certain “skills” (here I am thinking of Plato’s use of *tékhnē*) from outside the plastic arts that implement *Critica*. Vico does this by crafting a definition of *scientia* based on rhetorical principles which he can place *alongside* (cf. *antistrophe* once again) the Cartesian definition. Essentially, Vico’s evocation of the Ciceronian *ars topica* is the basis for the argument I will be making in my Conclusion that the important role forensic spontaneity played in the Neapolitan courts may very well have helped generate the prescient proto-oral-evolutionary aspect of his ambivalent understanding of Homer. Vico frames this concern as a matter of teaching the students to “discover arguments” through experience in speaking:

In our days, . . . philosophical criticism [*Critica*] alone is honored.
The art of “topics,” far from being given first place in the curriculum,

is utterly disregarded. Again I say, this is harmful, since the invention of arguments is by nature prior to the judgment of their validity, so that, in teaching, that invention should be given priority over philosophical criticism. In our days, we keep away from the art of inventing arguments, and think that this skill is of no use. We hear people affirming that, if individuals are critically endowed, it is sufficient to teach them a certain subject, and they will have the capacity to discover whether there is any truth that subject. It is claimed that, without any previous training in the *ars topica*, any person will be able to discern the probabilities which surround any ordinary topic, and to evaluate them by *the same standard employed in the sifting of the truth* [Gianturco's emphasis] (page 14)

Here is perhaps the clearest expression in the entire Seventh Oration of Vico's desire to rescue rhetoric considered as a viable tool for legitimate rational inquiry from the dustbin, as it were, into which the early Enlightenment had tossed it. Michael Mooney addresses Descartes' disdain for rhetoric by quoting the man himself: "Those who have the strongest power of reasoning . . . and who most skillfully arrange their thoughts in order to render them clear and intelligible, have the best power of persuasion even if they can but speak the language of Lower Brittany and have never learned Rhetoric."³ Descartes' fervent demarcation of "clear and intelligible" from "persuasive" constitutes a direct challenge to the epistemological utility of the Aristotelian enthymeme not requiring both a major premise and a minor premise (designed to demonstrate

³ Michael Mooney, *Vico in the Tradition of Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 8.

probability rather than certainty) as a means of ascertaining “truth.” “The language of Lower Brittany” obviously refers to someone who, though untutored in sophisticated rhetorical techniques, still has a superior abstract reasoning faculty manifested as, e.g., an intuitive gift for mathematics.

In contrast, Vico’s rationale is pragmatic in the sense that William James meant when he said “the truth is what works.” As Gianturco remarks, in Vico’s capacity as an educator, he had to uphold the principle that “in teaching, . . . invention [*Inventio* = *phantasia*] should be given priority over philosophical criticism [*Critica*], since the invention of arguments is by nature prior to the judgment of their validity.” (*Study Methods*, p. 14) His use of the formal Ciceronian rhetorical term *Inventio*, which is essentially identical with the *ars topica*, is of great significance in making a case for continuity between the Seventh Oration and the *Scienza nuova*. This word, which Gianturco translates with the cognate “invention” (thoroughly in line with classical rhetorical nomenclature), can also be quite correctly and powerfully rendered as “discovery,” which, as we shall see, is the central concept behind Vico’s method of historical inquiry, that being to search out, analyze, and classify original societal institutions using mainly etymology. Hence the title of *Scienza nuova*, Book III: “Della scoperta del vero Omero” (“On the Discovery of the True Homer”). In other words, the very concept of “unearthing” or “uncovering” for which Vico has

received recognition lies deeply embedded, so to speak, in his appreciation for Cicero's employment of *Inventio* as he learned it from Aristotle.

Now that he has argued for the necessity of differentiating between *Critica* and *ars topica*, Vico needs a *scientia* gleaned from the collective *sapientia* of the Classical corpus to put the humanities on a par with Cartesian epistemology. He does this by invoking the *auctoritas* of the Ancients, advocating the inclusion of geometry, a *scientific* instrument of regulation, in the anti-Cartesian curriculum. How does he reconcile this objective with his earlier assertion that reason comes only with age? He does so by imputing a creative aspect to geometry. "The science of geometry . . . cannot be grasped without a vivid capacity to form images." He is referring to plane rather than coordinate geometry; to "palpable" lines and figures rather than "abstract" points set in two dimensions in space; in other words, to the ancient geometer Euclid, and not Descartes. It will be this more venerable "ancient" geometry associated with Egypt, Greece, and the medieval quadrivium that will "make possible" the images needed for the *ékphrasis* in the *Scienza nuova*.

Vico also hammers home an ulterior message which, Gianturco asserts, is not really sublimated:

Vico's anti-Cartesianism appears in the *De nostri*, in a form which is as sharp-edged as it is "clear and distinct" (a Cartesian anti-Cartesianism, so to speak). . . . (p. xxv)

Here Gianturco broaches the subject he has been chafing at the bit to address with an etiological question eerily reminiscent of Vergil's epic-igniting "mihi causas memora." He asks, "What were the reasons for Vico's antagonism to Descartes?" (ibid, p. xxv) He immediately discounts one motivation that might seem self-evident, but which, he claims, could not possibly have been among the reasons:

One assumption must be discarded at the outset. The reasons were not nationalistic. [my emphasis] The reading of Vico in a nationalistic key, in the manner of Gioberti, is unhistorical. In 1708, the date of the *De nostri*, the Kingdom of Naples, after a period of Spanish rule, was under Austrian domination; no idea of Italian chauvinism existed there, even phantasmally. (*ibid.*)

I cannot emphasize enough that on this particular point Gianturco is completely misguided. The evident cause of his mistake is that he confuses Italy's chronic political disunity, which lasted in one form or another until 1871, with Vico's deeply autochthonous identification with its past. Perhaps he has overlooked this element because from our viewpoint Vico's anthropology concerning the French in particular is so laughably specious, based as it is on utterly *unscientific* assumptions. In any event, as I shall now show with text from the *De nostri*, Vico's rejection of Cartesian epistemology does indeed have a *flagrantly* nationalistic element.

To begin his train of reasoning, Vico compares linguistic stress-patterns and semantic capacities; and then he expands upon the linguistic element in a way that betrays his anti-Gallic bias:

French words have only two kinds of stress; they are accented on the ultima and on the penult, whereas Italian stresses the penult. In French the accent shifts to the penult, which results in a somewhat tenuous and thin sound. For these reasons, French is not fit for stately prose, nor for sublime verse. But of the French language cannot rise to any great sublimity or splendor, it is admirably suited to the subtle style. Rich in substantives [i.e. abstract nouns], especially those denoting what the Scholastics call abstract essences, the French language can always condense into a small compass the essentials of things. Since arts and sciences are mostly concerned with general notions, French is therefore splendidly suited to the didactic genre. While we Italians praise our orators for fluency, lucidity, and eloquence, the French praise theirs for reasoning truly. Whenever the French wish to designate the mental faculty by which we rapidly, aptly, and felicitously couple things which stand apart, they call it *esprit* [*spiritum*], and are inclined to view as a naïve, simple trick when we consider as forceful power of combination; their minds, characterized by exceeding penetration, do not excel in synthetic power, but in piercing subtlety of reasoning. Consequently, if there is any truth in this statement, which is the theme of a famous debate, “genius is a product of language, not language of genius” [*linguis ingenia, non linguas ingeniis, formari*], we must recognize that the French are the only people who, thanks to the subtlety of their language, were able to invent the new philosophical criticism which seems so thoroughly intellectualistic, and analytical geometry, by which the subject matter of mathematics is, as far as possible, stripped of all concrete, figural elements and reduced to pure rationality [*quantum ex se est, omni prorsus corpulentia exuit*]. (p. 40)

This passage is an excellent example of Vico’s abiding interest in “foundations,” which remains keen all the way from 1708 to his death in 1744. I recapitulate

his argument as follows: At an early stage in the differentiation among the Romance languages as they evolved away from Greek and Latin, French lost certain linguistic features necessary for the creation of imaginative literary forms. This is in large part because the phonological structure of their language, as it has evolved from the Latin, has become “tenuous and thin.” Hence the French (among them, of course, Descartes!) have become inferior to other European nations in their skills with poetry, rhetoric, and philosophy,

Having said this, however, Vico must face the reality that the Cartesian “revolution” has discredited classical rhetoric as a means of evaluating the soundness of scientific arguments, replacing rhetorically arranged Aristotelian logic with the Rationalist deductive formulary. So, to make his position formally acceptable, Vico must give credit where credit is due, while still preserving the integrity of his own field of expertise:

The French are in the habit of praising the kind of eloquence which characterizes their language, i.e., the eloquence characterized by great fidelity to truth and subtlety, as well as by its noble deductive order [*deducta ordinis virtute*]. (p. 40)

This sudden praise for the inherent *strengths* French philosophical capacities possess, featuring the phrases “fidelity to truth and subtlety” and “noble deductive order,” substantially undermines the hatchet-job, if you will, that Vico has been perpetrating on French capabilities. It constitutes a concession that Descartes’ scorn for traditional *sapientia* actually does have both ethical and

epistemological value. This is essentially why what Vico claims next comes almost as braggadocio:

We Italians, instead, are endowed with a language which constantly evokes images [*imagines*]. We stand far above other nations by our achievements in the fields of painting, sculpture, architecture, and music. (p. 40)

Vico argues before his captive audience that, while French is a superior medium for engaging in deductive (Vico's code-word for the subtly pejorative "abstract") reasoning, Italian exceeds it in its power to generate images and metaphors.

Another way of putting Vico's position is that while other European languages are phonologically closer to ancient Greek and Latin (and hence Greco-Roman continuum), having developed literary traditions of their own derived from those of antiquity, under Descartes' influence French has become the modern European language that is most *linguistically appropriate* for dealing with *Critica*, which is Vico's Latin code-word for the Cartesian method of critical analysis through systematic doubt. In short, the Italians are inherently superior to the French in *les beaux arts*.

In offering this train of reasoning, Vico has been playing an interesting Socratic game affecting praise of the French language on the grounds of its critical capacities ("the Modern"), while actually fulfilling his professorial responsibility of praising the Greco-Roman contribution to the humanities ("the Ancient"). I propose a way to interpret this sudden turnabout. I believe that

rhetorically conceding the power of French philosophical capacities is Vico's "method" of cutting the French off from the Egypto-Greco-Romano-Italian continuum that will become a pivotal aspect of his cultural theory, one that Vico outlines quite specifically in the "Chronological Table" at the beginning of the *Scienza nuova*, where the French are conspicuous in their absence. In making this distinction, Vico is doing more than making claims about national characteristics or predispositions. Geometry "stripped of all concrete, figural elements and reduced to pure rationality," as the *De nostri* reads, is an oblique reference to the Gallic promotion of Rationalism, which Vico considers both anti-iconic and anti-discursive.

Having thus established the natural dialectical opposition of the Aristotelian/Ciceronian *ars topica* to the Cartesian method, Vico's next task is to link Italians to other European cultures in a way that decisively leaves the French out of the tradition:

Our language, thanks to its perpetual dynamism, forces the attention of the listeners by means of metaphorical expressions, and prompts it to move back and forth between ideas which are far apart [*actuosa semper auditorum mentes in res longe dissitas, & remotas vi similitudinum transfert*]. In the keenness of their perception, the Italians are second only to the Spaniards [???]. (pp. 40-41)

Without bothering to explain exactly what he means by "perpetual dynamism," Vico makes what I believe can be construed as an oblique reference to the

relationship between oral epic and metaphor that he will develop fully in the *Scienza nuova*. The significant phrase here is “the attention [or, better, the more literal “minds”] of the listeners,” because it evokes the era of the *favole* referred to in §877-§878. If we extrapolate on the basis of Vico’s treatment of Homer in the *Scienza nuova*, we may even be tempted to credit him with conjuring up the faint image of the Hellenic *oidós/rhapsoidós* performing for an attentive audience.

In the next passage, Vico completes the connections he had been intending to make all along:

Theirs [i.e., that of the Italians] is a language which, in the rich and elevated style (i.e., that of Herodotus, Livy, and Cicero), possesses a Guicciardini; in the grand and vehement style of Thucydides, Demosthenes, and Sallust, it has others; in Attic elegance, it has Boccaccio; in the new lyric style, Petrarch. Ariosto, in the grandeur of his plots and the ease of his diction, and puts one in mind of Homer; a poet like Tasso by the enchantingly musical sublimity of his rhyme, comes fully up to Virgil. Shall we then not cultivate a language possessing such felicitous qualities?

Having safely isolated the recently dominant Cartesian anti-representational paradigm from the European tradition, Vico finally has what he wants. Through what is from his standpoint a thoroughly reasonable protreptic progression—or, to preserve the theme of rivalry with the Rationalist Descartes, “method”—he has brought into association a catalogue of geniuses containing not only the Romans

Cicero and Virgil but several Hellenic figures, as well. He is patently determined to keep the Greco-Roman continuum intact.

When Vico finally does get around to mentioning poets, we find other curiosities. Last but (presumably) not least, he mentions epic. That he has manipulated the order of genres for forensic purposes is of considerable interest. The question is: by placing epic *after* history and rhetoric, is Vico ironically emphasizing epic's primordial, *sui generis* status, as he would describe it later in *Scienza nuova* §§877-878? Or is he downplaying "oral" epic's modern relevance compared to "written" forms of expression, which is a prominent sub-theme in Book II? Vico states that the native Italian Ariosto "puts one in mind of" Homer. That he should compare Ariosto and Homer on the basis of "the grandeur of their plots and ease of their diction" is noteworthy because "plots" and "diction" are features one associates with synchronic literary epic as it evolves from preliterate narrative forms.⁴ I observe this in order to make the case that when he uses this terminology, he essentially discloses the simultaneity of the other dipode of the "oral versus written" dichotomy, which was established when he referred to "the minds of his listeners." Meanwhile, Vico's comparison of the native Italian Tasso with Vergil, while ostensibly referring to literary epic can, I

⁴ And where in this catalogue, pray tell, is Dante, whom Vico would call, in the *Scienza nuova*, "the Italian Homer"?

assert, also be alluding on a deep level to the Venetian tradition in which the gondoliers actually “sang” Tasso, as well as to his own boyhood experience, notably cited by Benedetto Croce, of hearing the *cantastorie* (singers of tales) on the docks of Naples. In sum, Vico’s ambiguity regarding epic displays itself even at this early stage.

We should reasonably expect the first figure in this catalogue to be Homer. But Vico has a more idiosyncratic protocol. First come the historians Herodotus and Livy, followed by the orator, philosopher and politician Cicero. Thus he establishes the Greece → Rome continuum. He is striving to create for his young minds a quasi-Aristotelian priority of history and rhetoric over poetry (one which will also operate in the *Scienza nuova*), while still managing to preserve the Greco-Roman continuum. (His need to promote this cultural propinquity was doubtless stimulated in part by the belief in his day that Latin evolved directly from Greek.) Vico links them through the phrase “rich and elevated,” language which arguably evokes Aristotle’s adjective characterizing the language of Homer and the Attic tragedians, *spoudaióteron* (“more elevated or serious”). Yet Vico is really using “elevated” here to characterize the deliberative written language of historians and rhetoricians *in contrast to* the spontaneity characteristic of the oral poetic tradition. Next come Thucydides, Demosthenes,

and Sallust—two Greeks and a Roman, two historians and a *rhétor*. Vico's priorities remain consistent.

I have suggested that one can think of the *De nostri* as a prolegomenon to Vico's decades-long project that constitute the various stages of the *Scienza nuova* of creating a culturally based *a posteriori* alternative to Cartesian *scientia*. To give just one example of such a continuity, I quote at paragraph from the opening section of the *Scienza nuova*, entitled "Establishment of Principles":

§159. [That] this [is the] nature of human civil affairs is confirmed by the example of the French nation. For in the midst of the barbarism of the twelfth century there was opened the famous Parisian school where Peter Lombard, the celebrated master of the Sentences, began to lecture on the subtlest scholastic theology. *And like a Homeric poem there still lived on the history of for Bishop Turpin of Paris, full of all those fables of the heroes of France called paladins which were later to fill so many romances and poems. And because of this premature passage from barbarism to the subtlest sciences, French remained a language of the greatest refinement. So much so indeed that of all living languages it seems most to have restored to our times the atticism of the Greeks, and it is the best of all languages for scientific reasoning, as the Greek was. Yet French preserves, as Greek did, many diphthongs, which are natural to a barbarous tongue still stiff and inept at combining consonants with vowels. In confirmation of what we have said of both these languages, we may here add an observation in regard to young people at an age when memory is tenacious, imagination vivid, and wit nimble. At this age they may profitably occupy themselves with languages and plane geometry, without thereby subduing that acerbity of mind still bound to the body which may be called the barbarism of the intellect. But if they pass on while yet in this immature stage to the highly subtle studies of metaphysical criticism or algebra, they become overfine for life in their way of thinking and are rendered incapable of any great work.*

I have italicized nearly all of §159 in order to stress that as an “Element” that is propaedeutic to Vico’s grand argument in the 1730/1744 *Scienza nuova*, it also re-invokes, with marked specificity, an astounding number of the themes he had developed before the student body in 1708/1709. Those familiar with his *opus* as a whole would naturally expect phrases like “barbarism of the intellect.” But here we encounter, in addition: (1) a simile between the Homeric “oral-to-written” process and that of the French medieval romances; (2) a virtual enthymeme connecting this “premature” evolution with the development of the French “scientific” proclivity that Descartes embodies; (3) a comparison between French and ancient Greek phonologies that ends up complimenting the French on being like the Greeks in having a collective scientific turn of mind, and (4) a characteristic, if not necessarily logical, Vichian *ricorso* (which can be thought of in this case as embracing the idea of “reminiscence”) describing the faculties young men possess that explain why they excel in learning “languages and plane geometry,” and that they must become more mature in order to succeed at “metaphysical criticism (*Critica* i.e., the Cartesian *Cogito*) or algebra.”

Anyone objecting by now to the polytropic nature of my critical approach should observe that here in §159 Vico asserts that EVERYTHING *begins* with Homer, “whom” he then immediately associates with history. History is the mechanism that allows things to “evolve” or “turn” (Greek: *trópos*) in certain

directions. According to this principle, Homeric heroes reflect (Western) civilization's "turn" from states of barbarity to states of lawfulness. Paragraph §159 reveals that Vico believes that Homer also represents the movement of society from illiteracy to literacy. It is on this basis that I can interpret discrepancies in the portrayal of Homer between Book II and Book III as *positive, non-self-contradictory* manifestations of the "oral versus written dilemma." Notice that Vico has no apparent conflict in positing a human dialectic that moves from an inchoate state to oral poetry; to written history, rhetoric, and poetry; to mathematics and science.

In a quite tangible sense, then, §159 represents the *Scienza nuova* in microcosm. For this hodgepodge list of linguistic theory linking phonology with particularized fields of national genius, cultural inheritances, and "scientific facts"⁵ reflects Vico's constant yearning to be able to encompass the Universal through a deep acquaintance with the *humaniores*. As a component of the *Scienza nuova*, §159 moves back and forth between the humanities and science, from France to Greece to Rome, between "ancient" and "modern." In doing so, it also reflects the legacy of the *De nostri temporis Studiorum Ratione*.

⁵ E.g., that the structure of a language can tell us things about national character, so that it is a perfectly logical proposition that the same culture that produced *Troubadours* and *Jongleurs* will eventually produce good coordinate geometers.

Chapter 2: CIRCUMSCRIBING VICO'S "PRESCIENCE"

As I stressed in the "Introduction," Gregory Nagy's contributions are a distinguished part of a lineage that extends back to the pioneering research of Milman Parry and Nagy's own mentor, Albert B. Lord; and the *muliggjørelse* of their empirical studies goes back still further to Ferdinand de Saussure's vital temporal criteria. Nagy has expressed his debt as follows:

In using the terms *synchronic* and *diachronic*, I follow a linguistic distinction made by Ferdinand de Saussure. For Saussure, synchrony and diachrony designate respectively a current state of a language and a phase in its evolution. I draw attention to Saussure's linking of *diachrony* and *evolution*, a link that proves to be crucial for understanding . . . Homeric poetry. In my publications: the last 20 years, I have worked out a general "evolutionary model" for the oral traditions that shaped Homeric poetry.¹

In accordance with tendencies Parry and Lord discovered among the South Slavic *guslars*, Nagy strives throughout his work to emphasize the fluidity of composition that oral transmission affords, a dynamic that changes once a particular performance is recorded and disseminated. Nagy prefers "reciters" over "singers." He has remarked:

¹ *Plato's Rhapsody and Homer's Music: The Poetics of the Panathenaic Festival in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), p. 3.

Just as the Homeric testimony about the performance of epic by singers at feasts belies the synchronic reality of the performance of epic by rhapsodes at festivals, so also the Homeric testimony about the singer's singing to the accompaniment of the lyre belies synchronic reality of the rhapsode's reciting without any accompaniment at all.²

He provides concrete support for his position in the following note:

The iconographic testimony of vase paintings showing rhapsodes either with a lyre or with a staff can be viewed as a parallel phenomenon of diachronic perspective on an evolving institution.
(p. 6)

² "Early Greek views of poets and poetry," in vol. 1 of *The Cambridge Companion to Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989; rpt. 1997), p. 6. In making this distinction between reciting and singing, Nagy inadvertently gives his imprimatur to Walt Whitman, who in his great 1879 "Death of Lincoln" speech proclaimed: "Why, if the old Greeks had had this man, what trilogies of plays – what epics – would have been made out of him! How the rhapsodes would have recited him!" This word-choice is particularly significant coming from the author of the quasi-Homeric "Myself I sing" (1855), in which Whitman refers directly to the *Iliad*:

*What singest thou? it said;
Know'st thou not, there is but one theme for ever-enduring bards?
And that is the theme of War, the fortune of battles,
The making of perfect soldiers?*
(ll. 8-11)

It is noteworthy that there is no definitive edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the auspicious collection which this poem opens, because Whitman continued to revise it for some time. I propose that this "open-endedness" is Whitman's *mímēsis* of the special creative capacities of oral epic; he doubtless would have received Nagy's concept of "(re-) composition in performance" most enthusiastically. Moreover, I juxtapose these two Whitman quotes as evidence that the "sing / recite" ambiguity is quite detectable in the Homeric *Rezeptionsgeschichte*.

In keeping with his loyalty to the sociolinguistic lineage Saussure initiated in *Cours de linguistique générale*,³ Nagy sees the issue as one of cultural memory:

On the basis of all available evidence, it appears that the rhapsodes did not sing the composition they performed but rather recited them without the accompaniment of the lyre. . . . We can be satisfied with the diachronic correctness of ancient Greek poetry's references to itself as song by noting that these self-references are traditional, not innovative. (p. 7)

If we interpret Nagy's paradigm in Saussurean terms, the singing of epic is the "diachronic" *langue*, or the language of cultural memory, while the recitations of the rhapsodes are the "synchronic" *parole*, or "state-of-affairs" (on this term associated with Wittgenstein, see below) as it had evolved at the point of a specific performance. Thus Nagy's model is both *evolutionary* and *hermeneutic*. This model also stresses that what we have as "Homer" is the end-product, as it were, of a complex tradition that began in "the dark backward and abysm of time," to quote the Bard of Avon's Miranda. It entails the idea that the stasis that inevitably came with literacy was itself manipulated along the way by heads of state (legendarily the sixth-century Athenian tyrant Peisistratos and his sons) and scholars (most notably those associated with the Alexandrian Library). Nagy's evolutionary model identifies five "periods":

³ This book, published posthumously in 1916 by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, is actually a compilation of lectures Saussure delivered at the University of Geneva between 1906 and 1911.

- (1) a relatively most fluid period, with no written texts, extending from the early second millennium into the middle of the eighth century in the first millennium BCE
- (2) a more formative “Panhellenic” period, still with no written texts, from the middle of the eighth century to the middle of the sixth BCE
- (3) a definitive period, centralized in Athens, with potential texts in the sense of *transcripts*, at any of several points from the middle of the sixth century BCE to the later part of the fourth BCE; this period starts with the reform of Homeric performance traditions in Athens during the régime of the Peisistratidai.
- (4) a standardizing period, with texts in the form of transcripts or even *scripts*, from the later part of the fourth century to the middle of second BCE; this period starts with the reform of Homeric performance traditions in Athens during the régime of Demetrius of Phalerum, which lasted from 317 to 307 BCE.
- (5) relatively most rigid period, with texts as *scripture*, from the middle of the second century BCE onward; this period starts with the completion of Aristarchus’ editorial work on the Homeric texts, not long after 150 BCE or so, which is a date that also marks the disappearance of the so-called “eccentric” papyri.⁴

In order to place this thesis at the center of my overall argument, I immediately juxtapose a summary which Vico interpolates as an appendix between Books Three and Four:

⁴ *Plato’s Rhapsody*, p. 6. This chronology modifies the one Nagy presents in *Homeric Questions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), pp. 41ff. The inclusion of “scripts” and “scripture” in the more recent (2002) version emphasize the rhapsodic, relatively fixed, “authoritative” quality of the Homeric “text” to which the Platonic Socrates reacts, notably in the *Ion*; Books Three and X of the *Republic*; and the references to “performance-as-relay” in the pseudo-Platonic *Hipparkhos*.

§905. We have already shown above that there were three ages of poets before Homer First came the age of the theological poets, who were themselves heroes and sang true and austere fables; second, that of the heroic poets, who altered and corrupted the fables [*favole*, i.e. the orally transmitted archaic stories]. . . ; and third, the Homeric age, which received them in their altered and corrupted form. Now the same metaphysical criticism of the history of the obscurest antiquity, that is, the explanation of the ideas the earliest nations naturally formed, can illuminate and distinguish for us the history of the dramatic and lyric poets, on which the philosophers have written only in an obscure and confused fashion.

Vico's summation contains several elements that anticipate today's paradigms. By no means do I claim that the contiguity between Vico and Nagy is exact. Yet Vico's "theological poets,. . . heroes . . . [who] sang true and austere fables" clearly describes an irretrievably archaic, illiterate age in which poems were transmitted *orally*, in a state leading toward Panhellenic dissemination. Furthermore, note that Vico's language anticipates—dare one even say *preformulates*?—that of Macpherson. I suggest the possibility that as his tacit evidence, Vico is referring here to what are *for him* philologically empirical entities, the most obvious one being Achilles in his capacity of *aoidós*, as described in Scroll Nine of the *Iliad*. Other clear examples would be Phemios and Demodokos in the *Odyssey*, Scroll Six. Interestingly, in §905 Vico differentiates the heroes themselves from later personages he calls "heroic poets" who, in the process of retelling the original *mūthoi*, "altered and corrupted" them. "Corrupted" is a value judgment connected

with Vico's ancillary yet crucial premise that European acculturation involved a kind of downward spiral, represented semiotically by words he applies both to Homeric characters and early states of Greco-Roman culture, e.g., "vulgar," "barbarian," and "primitive." Vico's treatment of Homer in Book III *as an oral poet*, however, invites a modification, because it de-emphasizes the Homeric function of historical authority that prevails throughout Book II. Thus for Book III, if we gloss "corrupted" with a more analytic definition such as "mutated through an inevitable process of distribution and consequent re-formation," Vico's perspective resembles Nagy's first two periods quite closely. Observe that in Vico's scheme here "Homer" is not a starting-point for epic, but rather represents an intermediary stage in the transmission process. This perspective is very modern indeed. In my view, it really sets Vico apart from his contemporaries.

Two restrictions on this pioneering aspect of Vico's model apply. The first is that his ideas on Homer cannot truly be considered to be based on the Greek, since he apparently knew Homer mainly through the Medieval Latin translations of spurious accounts of the Trojan War by first-century C.E. Greek authors Dares and Dictys.⁵ This limitation on his conception of Homer goes far to explain why he tries so hard to supersede the debate that was taking place in

⁵ See Penguin Edition

Europe which concentrated on Homer's literary merits *vis-à-vis* those of so-called "Moderns." To look at it a positive way, Vico's lack of interest in a Homeric "text" *per se* separates him from such as Richard Bentley and Alexander Pope, ironically freeing him to move in the direction of considering the "epic singer" as a cultural phenomenon.

A second caveat to the notion that Vico's ideas prefigure modern paradigms concerns the irony that his revolutionary treatment of Homer does not *follow from* the "Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns," but is simultaneous with it. Joseph Mali has alluded to this element in Vico's work, observing that "the contest . . . between the professors and the priests [concerning Vico's posthumous reputation] was similar to the one in which Vico himself participated, that between the Ancients and Moderns over Homer."⁶ The present study explores this aspect of the *Scienza Nuova*, which as Mali epitomizes it here, is manifest but general, as the very platform of Vico's originality. Consider, for example, this assessment from Kirsti Simonsuuri:

After the first quarter of the eighteenth century the issues of the *querelle* gradually but decisively began to lose their force, and a new approach to the culture of Classical antiquity was on the way. The *modernes*, those who insisted on contemporary taste and values, came to dominate the literature and criticism of the time. . . . [A]fter 1730 we find neither the irate attacks on the epics nor the committed treatises about their merit that characterized the

⁶ *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico's 'New Science'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 267.

discussion of Homer at the time of the *querelle*. Rather we find studies which concentrate on one aspect or other of the Homeric problem or which merely use Homer as a peg on which to hang some social, psychological, or literary idea. This was the point when Vico's treatise appeared (1730) and his idea that the Homeric epics represented the collective mind of the Greek peoples can be seen as a . . . crucial turning point in the development we are considering.⁷

Simonsuuri is right to say that Vico's work signals a shift in focus from contests over literary superiority to anthropological issues.⁸ Later, I present other opinions echoing this view, which (as is implicit from my linking Vico and Nagy) I basically share. The caveat is that it is a mistake to draw too sharp a line between Vico and his contemporaries. Accordingly, I shall also discuss Pope's concept of Homer in some detail, primarily to demonstrate how the self-contradictory aspects of Vico's still elusive agenda can co-exist.

The consensus has been that Vico's conception of Homer as it appears primarily in Book III of the *Scienza Nuova* stands apart from the "Quarrel" in that he promulgated it to serve grander, more original purposes. Clearly influenced by Vico's own arguments (principally in the *Autobiografia* and the *Scienza*

⁷ "Vico's discovery of the true Homer," Chapter 7 of *Homer's original genius*, p. 90.

⁸ In a curious way, it all amounts to a kind of "renaming." Between 1690 and 1795 the focus of the polemic in Europe shifted from a general Quarrel over whether Homer was somehow "purer" than, say, Shakespeare or Descartes, to the Question of whether there ever really was one "Homer" and what kind of primitive society might have produced such a type.

Nuova), scholars have generally shown him the courtesy of approving his strategy of using his copious ideas on Homer as evidence supporting his historical theories. An outstanding example of this perspective is Leon Pompa's detailed analysis. While claiming that Vico fundamentally conceived of Homer as a philosopher, Pompa states as follows about the poet's place in the work's overall argument:

The assumptions of this enquiry, taken in conjunction with the theory that any given society is unified by communal modes of thought and attitude which are the products of the history of its own institutional developments, directly support Vico's conclusion that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are products of different historical societies. . . . The poems of Homer are thus explained by Vico as a later compilation of the products of earlier ages. This conclusion leads directly to Vico's second claim, that Homer himself may never have existed as an actual historical person, and that he may have been the personification of the social type, the Greek rhapsodes, whose function it was to relate these tales. Hence Vico investigates resemblances between Homer and the rhapsodes, their mutual blindness, poverty, indefinite age and so on, coming to the conclusion that Homer was probably a personification of these traditional tellers of tales. In this way also, he is able to resolve some of the difficulties involved in the concept of a single spatio-temporal Homer for he can argue that "the Homer who was the author of the *Iliad* [i.e., one of the "rhapsodes"] preceded by many centuries the Homer who was the author of the *Odyssey* [another set]" [§880] . . . and that the two Homers came from different geographical areas.⁹

⁹ *Vico: A Study of the 'New Science,'* Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1990), p. 139.

Pompa states certain things about Vico's understanding of Homer that suggest a general affinity with the Parry-Lord Hypothesis. The first is that properly understood, "Homer" is not to be thought of as an individual, but rather as the record of "communal modes of thought and attitude which are the products of the history of its own institutional developments"; he thus echoes Simonsuuri's phrase "collective mind." Pompa's synopsis of Vico could well have served to introduce Nagy's five-stage model. Following from this hermeneutic formulation is his corollary point that Vico realized the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are most accurately conceived of as temporally *separate* linguistico-cultural products, and that hence, each epic as we have it is the "end-result" of a *separate* set of performances by a *separate* set of performers. This conclusion, too, harmonizes with Nagy's framework. Pompa's intermediate assertion that Vico's theory differentiates unequivocally between "Homer and the rhapsodes" is the least defensible on the ambiguous evidence. Nevertheless, if we accept the idea that Vico does make such a distinction implicitly, it would fall right in with Nagy's framework.

There is some disagreement over when this controversy actually started. I was surprised, for instance, to find Robert Fowler asserting as follows:

Certain anticipations apart, the modern debate began in 1788 with the publication by Villoison of the scholia in the tenth-century manuscript of the *Iliad*, Venetus Marcianus Graecus 454. These marginal notes preserve substantial remnants of ancient scholarship

in the poems, going back as far as third-century B.C. Alexandria and permitting inferences about the earlier state of the text. Starting from the premise that Homer lived in an illiterate age (a premise which, ironically enough, we now know to be false), and using the new evidence, F. A. Wolf in 1795 argued that the poems as we have them were put together by a compiler living long after Homer, who had been a simple singer of heroic lays.¹⁰

The remainder of his article is a survey of current theories on how and when the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* may have been composed, transmitted, and “written down.” The “anticipations” Fowler mentions evidently include the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century arguments that form the backdrop of my own study, though he refers to them only elliptically. I point out that, contrary to Fowler's implication, the “modern debate” began well before 1788, though admittedly in a rudimentary form. It actually had its roots in the Renaissance, and was “all the rage” by 1715-1720—the dates of the serial publication of Pope's *Iliad*. I agree that the fresh availability in 1791 of a more “reliable” Homeric text (i.e., Venetus Marcianus Graecus 454) led to breakthroughs that would lead to modern theories. Nonetheless, I think it is a mistake to emphasize this discovery as completely revolutionary. To elaborate on my position, I now digress, bringing works by England's best-known Augustans into the discussion.

¹⁰ “The Homeric Question,” *The Cambridge Companion to Homer* (Cambridge U. Press, 2004), p. 220.

2. THREE ENGLISH AUGUSTAN “HOMERS”

In *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Jonathan Swift offers proof that the general Ancients versus Moderns polemic was a busy industry far prior to 1788, which, to repeat, is the date Villoison published the “Venetus A” manuscript. Reprising the dialectic he established in Books I and II, in Chapter Eight of Book III Dean Swift simultaneously parodies the *Nekuía* (Odysseus’ “Descent into the Underworld” in *Odyssey*, Scroll Eleven) and satirizes the Quarrel, particularly as manifested in a perceptible shift in *auctoritas* from literature to science. In a comedic *mise en abîme*, Swift begins the chapter with a description of the “hero” Gulliver himself “reenacting” Odysseus, conveniently encountering his own model, the incomparable *mendax hortator*, in the company of antiquity’s greatest natural philosopher. To convey the full effect, I must quote at length:

Having a desire to see those Antients, who were most renowned for Wit and Learning, I set apart one Day on purpose. I proposed that *Homer* and *Aristotle* might appear at the Head of all their Commentators; but these were so numerous that some hundreds were forced to attend in the Court and outward Rooms of the Palace. I knew and could distinguish those two Heroes at first sight, not only from the Croud, but from each other. *Homer* was the taller and comelier Person of the two, walked very erect for one of his Age, and his Eyes were the most quick and piercing I ever beheld. *Aristotle* stooped much, and made use of a Staff. His Visage was meager, his Hair lank and thin, and his Voice hollow. I soon discovered that both of were perfect Strangers to the rest of the Company, and had never seen or heard of them before. And I had a Whisper from a Ghost, who shall be nameless, that these

Commentators always kept in the most distant Quarters from their Principals in the lower World, through a Consciousness of Shame and Guilt, because they had so horribly misrepresented the Meaning of those Authors to Posterity. I introduced *Didymus* and *Eustathius* to *Homer*, and prevailed on him to treat them better than perhaps they deserved; for he soon found they wanted a Genius to enter into the Spirit of a poet.¹ . . .

Swift's waggish allegory is diaphanous. The poet Homer's ghost is eternally vigorous and sharp-eyed, despite his blindness in life. By contrast, the philosopher Aristotle *qua* scientist is "stooped" from the burden of having been utterly superannuated, despite his one-time ascendancy. *Ars longa, scientia brevis*. Meanwhile, a second level of figuration is operating. Commentators abound, but their ostensible purpose, indeed their very *raison d'être*, is in question because they are now irretrievably, *physically* alienated from their subject. To frame the problem, Swift lampoons here using the jargon of deconstruction: the *presence* of *ad hoc* self-referential "commentaries" has forced the *absence* of the "true Homer."

So much for the "Antients"; feeble old transitional Aristotle metonymically represents the uppermost limn of the general shift in truth-telling authority from Poetry to Science that distinguishes the Modern understanding of "reality." (Notably, Swift's allegory omits Plato.) Thus as our latter-day Odysseus continues his descent, the scientists predominate:

¹ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1941), p. 181.

I then desired the Governor to call up *Descartes* and *Gassendi*, with whom I prevailed to explain their Systems to *Aristotle*. This great Philosopher freely acknowledged his own Mistakes in Natural Philosophy, because he proceeded in many things upon Conjecture, as all Men must do; and he found, that *Gassendi*, who had made the Doctrine of *Epicurus* [see my Section 3] as palatable as he could, and the *Vortices* of *Descartes* !! were equally exploded. He predicted the same Fate to *Attraction*, whereof the present Learned are such zealous Asserters. He said, that new Systems of Nature were but new Fashions, which would vary in every Age; and even those who pretend to demonstrate them from Mathematical Principles, would flourish but a short Period of Time, and be out of Vogue when that was determined. (pp. 181-182)

These still lower wraiths created systems that were eventually deemed untenable and were hence replaced by a succession of others. Rather subtly, Swift connects this constant change with the flaw that, being “conjectural,” none of these systems has ever taken into account the *sine qua non* for a scientific theory of being empirically refutable.

Gulliver’s descent continues to its inevitable conclusion. Re-enacting Plato’s rueful *double entente* in the opening statement of the *Republic*, “I went down to the Piraeus,” Gulliver speaks thus of the Moderns he meets at the very bottom:

As every Person called up made exactly the same Appearance he had done in the World, it gave me melancholy Reflections to observe how much the Race of human Kind was degenerate among us, within these Hundred Years past. How the Pox under all its Consequences and Denominations had altered every Lineament of an *English* Countenance, shortned the Size of Bodies, unbraced the Nerves, relaxed the Sinews and Muscles, introduced a sallow Complexion, and rendered the Flesh loose and *rancid*. (pp. 185-186)

What began as the mimetic narrative of an adventure has, by chapter's end, become a metaphor for cultural decline—or, to view the matter from a different perspective—for the rise of modernity. Accordingly, I ask the reader to bear Swift's use of Homer here vividly in mind when I detail the function "Homer" assumes in Vico's historical arguments. I am not claiming that the Italian actually *knew* Swift's work, or that their background concepts are identical, but rather that the similarities in their culturally oriented perspectives are no coincidence. To put it another way, the Ancients and Moderns paradigm was "larger" than those who participated in it, in the sense that it pervaded literary discourse.

The cross-referential satire is wider still. Ultimately, Gulliver's *Nekuía* is an obvious parody of Alexander Pope's remarks in his "Preface" to the his own *Iliad* translation from which it is once more appropriate to quote at length:

IT is something strange that of all the Commentators upon *Homer*, there is hardly one whose principal Design is to illustrate the Poetical Beauties of the Author. They are Voluminous in explaining those Sciences which he made but subservient to his Poetry, and sparing only upon that Art which constitutes his Character. This has been occasion'd by the Ostentation of Men who had more Reading than Taste, and were fonder of showing their Variety of Learning in all Kinds, than their single Understanding in Poetry. Hence it comes to pass that their Remarks are rather Philosophical, Historical, Geographical, Allegorical, or in short rather any thing than Critical and Poetical. Even the Grammarians, tho' their whole Business and Use be only to render the Words of an Author intelligible, are strangely touch'd with the Pride of doing something

more than they ought. The grand Ambition of one sort of Scholars is to encrease the Number of *Various Lections*, which they have done to such a degree of obscure Diligence, that we now begin to value the first Editions of Books as most correct, because they have been least corrected. The prevailing Passion of others is to discover *New Meanings* in an Author, whom they will cause to appear mysterious purely for the Vanity of being thought to unravel him. These account it a disgrace to be of the Opinion of those that preceded them; and it is generally the Fate of such People who will never say what was said before, to say what will never be said after them. If they can but find a Word that has once been strain'd by some dark Writer to signify any thing different from its usual Acceptation, it is frequent with them to apply it constantly to that uncommon Meaning, whenever they meet it in a clear Writer: For Reading is so much dearer to them than Sense, that they will discard it at any time to make way for a Criticism. In other Places where they cannot contest the Truth of the common Interpretation, they get themselves room for Dissertation by imaginary *Amphibologies*, which they will have to be design'd by the Author. This Disposition of finding out different Significations in one thing, may be the Effect of either too much, or too little Wit: For Men of a right Understanding generally see at once all that an Author can reasonably mean, but others are apt to fancy Two Meanings for want of knowing One. Not to add, that there is a vast deal of difference between the Learning of a Critick, and the Puzzling of a Grammarian.

It is no easy Task to make something out of a hundred Pedants that is not Pedantical; yet this he must do, who would give a tolerable Abstract of the former Expositors of *Homer*. The Commentaries of *Eustathius* are indeed an immense Treasury of the *Greek* Learning; but as he seems to have amassed the Substance of whatever others had written upon the Author, so he is not free from some of the foregoing Censures. There are those who have said, that a judicious Abstract of Him alone might furnish out sufficient Illustrations upon *Homer*. It was resolv'd to take the trouble of reading thro' that voluminous Work, and the Reader may be assur'd, those Remarks that any way concern the Poetry or Art of the Poet, are much fewer than is imagin'd. The greater Part of these is already plunder'd by succeeding Commentators, who have very little but what they owe to him: and I am oblig'd to say even of Madam *Dacier*, that she is either more beholden to him than she has

confessed, or has read him less than she is willing to own. She has made a farther Attempt than her Predecessors to discover the Beauties of the Poet; tho' we have often only her general Praises and Exclamations instead of Reasons. But her Remarks all together are the most judicious Collection extant of the scatter'd Observations of the Ancients and Moderns, as her Preface is excellent, and her Translation equally careful and elegant.

Everything we saw as Swiftian social comment ultimately starts with Pope, right down to diction: complaints about the *hubris* of the pedantic Greek “grammarians” who arrogate to themselves a “scientific” status; reference to the problem that their quibbling makes reading Homer like struggling through an encyclopedia rather than savoring sublime poetry; an acknowledgment of the formal reality of the Ancients and Moderns controversy through praise of Anne Dacier’s emotive approach to translation. Ironically, Pope consolidates all these influences to justify an effort for which he would be consistently faulted.

A fruitful understanding of the Quarrel as it stood in Vico’s day can be gained from examining the skirmish of authority between Pope (1688-1744) and Richard Bentley (1662-1742), who is most likely the “grammarian / Critick” Pope most detested. As a framework for this topic, I have a few observations to make about the early eighteenth-century “state-of-affairs”² concerning Homer. To

² I take the liberty of employing this phrase as an aesthetic approximation of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s sentence 2.014 in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “Die Gegenstände enthalten die Möglichkeit aller Sachlagen.” (“Objects contain the possibility of all states-of-affairs.”) My appropriation allows the position that in any particular *epistēmē* (on this Foucaultian term, see below) the reification of (theoretically

begin with, it is not irrelevant that Vico, Pope, Bentley, and Dacier (1651-1720) were contemporaries. Moreover, it is fairly clear that on some level they suggest each other's work. They thus form what I think of as a "hermeneutic cluster" reflecting a remarkably pervasive image of "Homer" that was controlling the discourse throughout Europe. The net effect was that relatively sparse textual and archeological data they were working from, combined with the "anxiety of influence" they inherited from the Classical tradition, had fomented a largely *ad hominem* polemic with hard heads all round. My second observation is that this cluster terminated rather rapidly, as Dr. Johnson's reaction to this pervasive image implies.

Even within this cluster, Richard Bentley deserves special attention. For he is the scholar who, by most accounts, initiated the true, modern, philologically grounded study of Homer in early eighteenth-century England. One must separate him from contemporaries offering opinions on or translations of Homer (specifically: Vico; Dacier; D'Aubignac; Swift; as well as Pope) because, unlike them, he had a knowledge of Greek grammar that was grounded in close study,

quite open) possibilities involves both knowledge and preference. Wittgenstein's indebtedness to Schopenhauer is unmistakable here. In this case the Wittgensteinian *Gegenstand* "Homer," while it has been conceived of in many ways, and will receive other objectifications in future, was limited in the early eighteenth century by: the individual commentator's proficiency in Greek; the state and availability of the Greek text; the intervening programs of "literary" *mímēsēs* like the *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost*; flagrant biases of "Taste" against multiformity (on this *nota bene* Dr. Johnson); and so forth.

and knew the Homeric texts very well. His learning, unparalleled in his day, resulted from the direct availability to him of manuscripts from the private library of Edward Stillingfleet, as well as from the Bodleian Library (Brink, pp. 25-27). He is still praised by many as an emender of certain Greek texts, despite lacking the lexical reference tools available to later scholars. None other than Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff has said, “how this young man came by such attainments is still a mystery.”³ The importance of Bentley’s supposedly mysterious, intuitive gift to the present study is that he was the first scholar to understand the metrical significance of the Homeric digamma (symbol F; phonemic value /w/). Wilamowitz notes this accomplishment rather in passing, remarking that, “concerning Homer, he got so far as discovering that the digamma was still metrically effective.” (p. 81) This is an almost dismissive summation of a technique more fully described in an 1833 account by Bentley’s biographer James Henry Monk:

The history of this celebrated letter, and its disappearance from the Greek alphabet, have been the subject of so much dispute among later scholars, that its very mention suggests a series of curious questions. . . . It is now, I believe, admitted. . . that the consonant must have been used by Homer, that its restoration is necessary for the prosody of many of his verses, and that for the first discovery of this fact we are indebted to Dr. Bentley. The digamma itself he had

³ *Geschichte der Philologie* (B.G. Trahner Verlag, 1921). Translated by Allan H. Harris as *History of Classical Scholarship*, with an introduction and notes by Hugh Lloyd-Jones (London: Duckworth & Co, 1982), p. 80.

seen mentioned in various ancient authors and grammarians; it had been recently found in some ancient inscriptions. . . [A]nd its former existence in the Aeolic was proved by being retained in the renowned descendant of that dialect, the Latin language; the words *ver*, *vicus*, *vinum*, *video*, &c. exhibiting a consonant which their Grecian kindred had discarded. The epithet 'Aeolic' seems to have been one cause which had prevented a suspicion of this letter's original existence in the poems of Homer, who was generally considered an Ionian. . .⁴

There are two intriguingly contradictory aspects of Bentley's work as Monk describes it here that merit scrutiny. The first is the basic accuracy of his first two observations—i.e., that the lexicon of Homeric Greek is overwhelmingly Ionic and Aeolic, and that there had always been a specific problem in the scansion of the Homeric dactylic hexameter that at the time cried out for a solution. It is important to emphasize these points in order to mitigate the assumption that these are late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century insights made by *Philologie* as it has evolved into "Indo-European historical linguistics." The second feature of the above passage that gets our attention is the *inaccuracy* of Bentley's idea, based on faulty etymology, that Latin was a *direct* descendant of the Aeolic dialect; it is basically the same mistake as Vico's assertion in *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* that "etymologies testify to the fact that a good and large part of the Latin language was imported among the Latins from

⁴ *The Life of Richard Bentley*, Second Edition, volume 2 (Cambridge: J.G. and F. Rivington, 1833), p. 361.

the Ionians.” This notion would only be dispelled by later developments in those same historical linguistics. In any event, the importance of Bentley’s “family tree” in the present context is that it resembles Vico’s method of deriving Roman cultural *semeia* from Greek archetypes through etymology.

In bringing up Bentley’s “Discovery of the True Digamma,” as it were, I point to an inconsistency in Monk’s *mūthos* (Aristotle’s word for “plot” in the opening of the *Poetics*). To begin with, Bentley was very much running against the tide; his interpolations were not particularly well received in his day. One suspects this is largely because he made his observation late, at age 70. Also, it was part of a pattern. His penchant for emending the hitherto unintelligible was something which had served him well in the case of, e.g., Phalerus, but rather disastrously in those of Cicero and Milton. (See Brink, pp. 81-83) In keeping with these narratives, most of the secondary sources I have consulted give the impression that Bentley’s exposition of the digamma’s function was an undeveloped conjecture. Monk’s account modifies this impression:

The discovery itself, and the process by which it was confirmed, mark the genius of Bentley and the logical turn of his mind. He first observed that the offensive hiatus in verses of the Iliad and Odyssey continually recurred in the same words; and some of them, he was led to believe, from the slender accounts which we possess of the old Aeolic dialect, had once been written with the digamma. By trying the experiment of inserting the consonant in all those words wherever they occurred in Homer, he found that in a great majority of instances he succeeded in improving the versification. On proceeding to make the same insertion and other words, where the

metre required support, his success was too general to proceed from accident, and established. . . [in] demonstration to truth of the discovery. At the same time in this restoration of the true orthography of so many words enabled him to correct sometimes faulty verses with perfect success and certainty. It must not be forgotten that Bentley made discovery at a time when there was much less information respecting the old orthography of Greece than we now [1833, *nota bene*] possess. Subsequent to that time the publication of some ancient grammatical works of which he knew nothing, has come as that the digamma was actually used in the very words to which Bentley affixed it: and a similar confirmation of his doctrine is derived from old inscriptions upon stones dug out of ruins in those parts of Greece where the consonant held its ground the longest. (p. 363)

Arguably, Bentley's primary original contribution to Homeric textual studies lies in his commendable reasoning, as according to Monk, that if the digamma is attested by inscriptions and grammarians, it must have a value and frequency that should cause us to change our understanding of the Homeric hexameter. Hence I wish to qualify the still pervasive opinion—encouraged by Bentley's notorious over-optimistic confidence in *intuitive* emendation, and exemplified in Wilamowitz's "faint praise" cited above—that his discovery was merely the product of lucky intuition.

Monk's Bentley was methodical by inclination. He was only thinking intuitively in the sense that he knew something was missing in the Moderns' "hearing" of Homer which had to be recovered from the Ancients. He was clearly addressing the anomaly presented by apparent frequent vowel hiatus as

obstructive to the flow of a hexameter that, in antiquity, was judged sublime. To highlight the prescience of Bentley's method I need only compare this brief testimony of Milman Parry's reliance on the basic criterion of metrical value from his earliest published work:

. . . [T]he *simplicity* [Parry's emphasis] of the system of epic language consists in the fact that corresponding dialectal or artificial elements are a unique metrical value; and the *extension of the system* lies in the great number of cases in which, to a given element of one dialect, one can oppose the corresponding element of another. It is evident that such a system can only be traditional: a poet who borrowed forms and words of a dialect other than his own, according to use personal taste, would inevitably, even if he made such borrowings infrequently, choose a certain number of equivalent metrical value.⁵

I submit that Bentley's and Parry's methods share an interest in modularity that endeavors to resolve nagging issues. Ironically, in an article called "The Traces of the Digamma in Ionic and Lesbian Greek," Parry explicitly chides Bentley for his "emendation mania":

Richard Bentley has won only blame for wishing to change a [*Odyssey*, Scroll One, line] 29 from μνήσατο γὰρ κατὰ θυμὸν ἄμύμονος Αἰγίσθοιο to μνήσατο γὰρ κατὰ νοῦν ἄνονήμονος Αἰγίσθοιο, . . . whereas his plan for writing the digamma into the Homeric text is still cited as one of his claims to fame. Yet in both cases he did much the same thing: he was unable to see why the traditional text was as it was, for he was unwilling to grant a simple lack of understanding on his own part, and so he changed the text. Had he known Homer better, however, or known more about other early poetries, he would have seen that the unreasoned use of the

⁵ "L'Épithète traditionnelle dans Homère (1921), translated as "The Traditional Epithet in Homer" in *The Making of Homeric Verse* (Adam Perry ed., 1971), p. 7.

fixed epithet is so common that we must explain it, not try to do away with it. . . . It is the same with the digamma. Had Bentley, or any of all of those scholars who have corrected Homer or printed the digamma in their editions been willing to grant that there might be some force acting on the Homeric language which they did not see, they would not have fought so fiercely against the stubborn text. (*Making*, p. 391)

In keeping with my point that both men attempted to introduce the extra-textual into “The Homeric Question,” I find Parry’s criticism of Bentley’s zeal for interpolating the digamma unduly harsh. Yet it is clear, on consideration, why Parry singles out Bentley in raising the issue. Yes, he is hoping to shift the formal model itself; but Parry’s reproof of any attempt to “change the text” also clears the way for him to transform himself in the minds of his prospective audience from a cloistered (in the sense of being constricted by the available Homeric texts) “philologist” in the Nietzschean meaning of a *slow reader* of Greek and Latin to an ethnographer who looks skeptically on texts, period. (Vico essentially does something similar in the *Scienza Nuova*.) I hold, against Parry’s criticism, that Bentley the “stubborn,” intuitive corrector should actually receive credit for having understood, before the heyday of comparative linguistics, that there must have been some unrecorded “force acting on the Homeric language” that might counteract the apparent ineuphonious hiatus in the text. Both Bentley and Parry are in a real sense prisoners of the *semeia* they have before them. Both are seeking a means of escape.

All of this information about Richard Bentley “superior” understanding of Homeric Greek metrics supports the common view that almost no one in Vico’s time aside from Bentley had anything like a close linguistic access to “the true Homer,” as this phrase characterizes the concepts held by the authors involved in “the Quarrel” themselves. This commonplace receives a great deal of support from the argument that the “translations” of Dacier and Pope are more properly “transformations.”⁶ It would be wrong, moreover, to think of this as an anachronistic modern insight, since it forms the very stuff of acrimonious exchanges between Bentley and his champions, and Pope. The most famous of these is Bentley’s admonition, made in an (apocryphal?) encounter with the “Wasp of Twickenham,” which Joseph Levine describes as follows:

There is a well-known story that tells how the two men once met. . . . Pope asked the formidable scholar what he thought of his translation. Bentley appeared not to hear, but was pressed for his judgment. “It is a pretty poem Mr. Pope,” he responded at last, “but you must not call it Homer.” (“Shield,” p. 99)

A more expansive and caustic encounter between Pope and Bentley’s nephew makes Bentley’s reasons for this opinion entirely clear:

“You are grown very angry, it seems, at Dr. Bentley of late. Is it because he said (to your Face, I have been told) that your Homer

⁶ On Pope’s hermeneutics concerning the functions of “translation,” see, for example, Pamela Poynter Schwandt, “Pope’s Transformation of Homer’s Similes,” *Studies in Philology*, 76 (1979), 387-417. Cited by Joseph Levine in “The Battle of the Books and the Shield of Achilles,” *The Autonomy of History: Truth and Method from Erasmus to Gibbon* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 91.

was miserable stuff? That it might be called *Homer Modernized* or something to that effect; but that there were little or no Vestiges of all of the old Grecian? Dr. Bentley said right. Hundreds have said the same behind your back. For Homer translated, first in English, secondly in Rhyme, thirdly not from the Original, but fourthly from a French Translation and that in prose and by a Woman too, how the Devil should it be Homer? As for the Greek Language, everybody that knows it and as compared your Version with the Original, as I have done in many Places, must know that you know nothing of it. I myself am satisfied. . . that you can barely construe Latin." (ibid.)

This amounts to a sustained accusation of corruption resulting from the distance that lies between Pope's rendition and the original Greek.

I underscore that Bentley was only one of a chorus of detractors. As

Levine observes:

[Pope's critics in Germany] insinuated. . . [that] Pope had been won to Homer by greed; Pope was a papist; Pope knew no Greek; the *Iliad* was a fraud. . . But it was left to Pope's old enemy, John Dennis, to carry out the task. In *Remarks upon Mr. Pope's Translation of Homer* (1717), he proceeded to expose Pope's weakness in Greek, although he obscured his arguments with his invective; Pope had "undertaken to translate *Homer* from *Greek*, of which he does not know one word, into *English* which he understands almost as little." (ibid., p. 9)

It appears from these well-worn anecdotes as though his Pope's contemporaries were obsessed with whether he was fit to attempt—much less complete—what one might construe from the standpoint of literary history as a mandatory exercise for a would-be “strong” poet with a reasonable awareness of the

“Western Canon,” to use Harold Bloom’s terms. Bentley implies that Pope can only fail because he lacks a necessary training in Greek.

Note that Pope has his revenge for Bentley’s superciliousness in his mock-epic *Dunciad*, Book IV, lines 215-18:

Roman and Greek Grammarians! know your Better:
 Author of something yet more great than Letter;
 While tow’ring o’er your Alphabet, like Saul,
 Stands our Digamma, and o’er-tops them all.

The phrase “something yet more great than Letter” is Bentley’s own. It allows Pope to take full “Socratic” (that is, sarcastic) advantage of his adversary through paranomasía. That is, the last two lines refer simultaneously to all three members of a semantic set {two Γs bound together vertically; more significant and arcane than “ordinary” readers of Homer—like English poets with deficient Greek who nonetheless rashly attempt translations—can understand; metaphysical, in the sense that Bentley claims to demonstrate that the digamma must be voiced to make the meter “smooth,” even though the empirical *sēma* F does not appear in the “text”}. In H.C. Andersen’s words, “Kejseren har ingenting på”—“The Emperor has nothing on.” Pope’s satire “reenacts” an attitude that was both common and persistent. Brink remarks that “the discovery met an almost total rejection and ridicule, which was to last up to the nineteenth-century [sic] when even a devoted admirer like F.A. Wolf could describe the Homeric

digamma as the result of Bentley at play in his dotage, *senile ludibrium ingenii Bentleiani*.” (p. 77)

Bentley’s scornful attitude brings up the question of what, precisely, a translation should be. One way of looking at it is as a matter of disparate values that expose translation as a quest for equilibrium between euphony and accuracy. This may seem inane, yet it bears expansion. The non-poet Bentley had little intuitive luck with English prosody. He botched Milton notoriously. Yet he was a pioneer in the pursuit of a just understanding of Homeric Greek itself. Thus one obvious reason why Bentley could so grumpily plan a translation that would be superior to Pope’s is that, unlike the poet, Bentley was not in competition with the *penumbrae* of Ogilvie, Chapman—or, less directly but more transcendently—Milton or Shakespeare. Nonetheless, Bentley’s objection to Pope’s supposed incompetency for the enterprise strikes one as quite modern; in effect, it makes Richmond Lattimore’s approximations of Homeric meter and lexicon possible, particularly as they exemplify a deliberate *clinamen* or “swerve” (to borrow the term Harold Bloom has taken from Lucretius) away from the aesthetic model, which is often said to have been established in the Renaissance, of “Englysshing” Greek and Latin works with greater attention to finding original ways of staying within the bounds of fixed

native rhyme, meter, and diction. From this viewpoint, Pope's translation is an "Ur-text" of, e.g., Fitzgerald and Fagles, who use traditional English verse-forms.

3. A DIGRESSION ON INFLUENCE

Before proceeding with my treatment of Vico's work *per se*, in this chapter I digress on the question of literary influence, with specific reference to Harold Bloom's concept of *clinamen*. My purpose is again to provide a more vivid background for evaluating what Vico felt he was doing. The first Bloom's "revisionary ratios," *clinamen* forms the very bedrock of his theories, even as they have evolved. His original "working definition" is as follows:

Clinamen . . . is poetic misreading or misprision proper. I take the word from Lucretius, where it means a "swerve" of the atoms so as to make change possible in the universe. A poet swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a *clinamen* in relation to it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves.¹

This definition "appropriates" in the best Kierkegaardian sense. Bloom gives us to understand that since he will be employing the term as a virtual neologism to suit his creative purposes—for, as Geoffrey Hartman, *et al.*, have advocated, it is high time to recognize literary theory as a full-fledged and distinct (if not technically independent) literary genre—one cannot chastise Bloom in the least

¹ *The Anxiety of Influence*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 14.

for not providing an elaborate provenance. Nevertheless, I think it enlightening to turn for a moment to Lucretius' actual use of the word in the *De rerum natura* in Book II, lines 288-96:

pondus enim prohibet ne plagis omnia fiant
 externa quasi vi; sed ne res ipsa necessum
 intestinum habeat cunctis in rebus agendis
 et devicta quasi cogatur ferre patique,
 id facit exiguum clinamen principiorum
 nec regione loci certa nec tempore certo.
 Nec stipata magis fuit umquam material
 copia nec porro maioribus intervallis;
 nam neque adaugescit quicquam neque deperit inde.

("The atoms, as their own weight bears them down
 Plumb through the void, at scarce determined times,
 In scarce determined places, from their course
 Decline a little—call it, so to speak,
 Mere changed trend. For were it not their wont
 Thuswise to swerve, down would they fall, each one,
 Like drops of rain, through the unbottomed void;
 And then collisions ne'er could be nor blows
 Among the primal elements; and thus
 Nature would never have created aught.")

—William Ellery Leonard translation)

Professor Mark Schiefsky of the Harvard Department of the Classics has pointed out to me this immediate and striking difference between Lucretius' physical definition and Bloom's aesthetic one: while the former always occurs by chance —*nec regione loci certa nec tempore certo* ("at scarce determined times, / In scarce determined places")—Bloom's *clinamen* manifestly entails a finite mind making a

deliberate decision to “swerve” from the template it has before it. This appropriated usage addresses an artistic genius’s effort to cope with “strong precursors.”

Bloom’s characteristically bold appropriation contains some paradoxes. First of all, there is this word “misprision,” which implies that the strong poet always *fails* to understand the precursor. The prefix “mis-” is arguably “misleading” in Bloom’s context, since “to read strongly,” in Bloom’s parlance, is the opposite of “to fail as a poet.” Were this not so, Bloom’s “misprision” would apply equally to strong poets and weak ones; but clearly he does not believe this. One way to mitigate the implication of failure is to understand “misprision” in a Deconstructionist sense—that is, as a phenomenon intrinsic to the enterprise of emulating precursors, and hence as leading inevitably to “difference / deference.” This interpretation is supported by Bloom’s dedication of his *Map of Misreading* to W.K. Wimsatt, who along with Monroe C. Beardsley branded as a fallacy the most “well-armed” notion that trying to gauge any author’s intent (otherwise expressible as conscious literary “swerve”) has any real critical value. The paradox is that understanding literary *clinamen* as a kind of “false hope” renders it *analogous* to the Lucretian randomness stipulation rather than contradictory to it; for the main import of the above quoted passage from the *De rerum* is that what appears to be *directed* downward movement by the atoms must actually be

random, in order to explain how change can take place in Nature at all. Here Lucretius is reflecting the doctrine of his own precursor Epicurus, who claimed that the ordering gods were long fled from the world and have been laughing from outside it ever since at our interpretation of chance as order.

Another paradox pertains to Bloom's claim that "swerve" is "corrective." Admittedly, the vainglorious proems (read "plans") of some strong poets encourage this notion. In Bloom's system, one finds such language when the "influenced" poet palpably intends to "update" the precursors' work, as a kind of overdue improvement. A most ready and "Bloom-friendly" example of this phenomenon is in *Paradise Lost*, Book I, lines 12-16:

. . . I thence
 Invoke thy [i.e., that of his Mnemosyne-substitute, the unnamed and
 theistically "unmarked" Urania] aid to my advent'rous Song,
 That with no middle flight intends to soar
 Above th' AONIAN Mount, while it pursues
 Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime.

This is paranomasía, a simultaneous reference to (1) the "adventure" of mankind's temptation, fall, and ultimate redemption through Christ (an ironic cycle, given that Satan's very ruination scheme causes it), and (2) Milton's bold attempt to sublimate the genius of his precursors, mainly Homer and Vergil. (This rarely encountered English word "sublate," by the way, the only proper way to represent the Hegelian verb *aufheben*, "to nullify by superseding," or equally, "to supersede

by nullifying.” Milton’s own lines 4-5 of his Proem, “With loss of EDEN, till one greater Man/ Restore us, and regain the blisful Seat [Latin *sēdēs*]” happen to gloss “sublate” quite well.) The same ambiguity applies to “unattempted,” which refers both to the *necessary* originality of creating a specifically Protestant, non-Dante-esque, anti-Papist epic on Classical models, and to the ingenuity of Satan’s scheme. “Advent’rous” and “unattempted” seem to ratify Bloom’s specification that *clinamen* is corrective. Ironically, however, Milton turns around and undoes his entire orthotic “intention” in lines 20-26:

If answerable style I can obtaine
Of my Celestial Patroness, who deignes
Her nightly visitation unimplor’d,
And dictates to me slumb’ring, or inspires
Easie my unpremeditated Verse:
Since first this subject for Heroic Song
Pleas’d me long choosing, and beginning late

Suddenly, Milton’s posture toward his precursors is unsteady, as the initial *sēma* “If” discloses. Against the already proclaimed goal of improving upon Classical epic, he realizes that he must maintain the textual ruse—and *ruse* it is—that he is “unimplor’d” and “unpremeditated,” for these are the sublime characteristics of real, original, oral, Homeric (“easie”) poetic inspiration. In an artistic heartbeat, Milton has become “answerable” to Homer rather than “advent’rous.” Here the special faculties of specifically *literary* genius are obstructive. Hence the poet prays he can—so to speak—“switch off” his profoundly educated functionality by

sleeping *during* composition. Here Milton fears his model, and thus must “swerve” backwards and try to cozy up to it with an “answerable stile.” It might be said that Bloom accommodates this retrograde fear by positing another “revisionary ratio” which he labels *kénosis*, “emptying out / humbling.” I prefer to think of such deflation as a counter-aspect of *clinamen*; in my modification, the swerve is to-and-fro. To mix metaphors, the poet can never be certain whether to aspire to conquer the antecedent paradigm at its summit, or supplicate it by grasping it at its figurative knees (cf. Dante’s commencement of his allegorical journey in the “foothills.”)

To define this pendulum-like function of *clinamen* still further, I introduce John Keats as a contrast to Milton. (I do so with apologies to those who, like Wimsatt and Beardsley, find any historical approach naive and inherently fallacious.) I argue that if there is any poet whose life throws light on his potentiality, it is Keats. Often, the sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (1816) appears as the first *sēma* of the young poet’s genius. Quoting it in full reveals something about Keats’s interpretation of the journey he has chosen to make:

Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold,
 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
 Round many western islands have I been
 Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
 That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
 When a new planet swims into his ken;
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
 He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
 Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

On encountering (cf. *discoverta*) this poem, Keats's audience is very likely struck by a certain feeling of opacity. The first four lines are essentially a *de rigueur* *mimēsis* of the Miltonic posture of sublation in his Proem. I call them "opaque" because at this point a reader will wonder exactly what being well-traveled has to do with Homer. Furthermore, although from Keats's solipsistic viewpoint these lines are metaphorical for his reading in travel-literature and history, from a "New Critical" perspective we are obligated consider them as foregrounding only. Suddenly it dawns upon one that this is *mimēsis* in the sense I have appropriated from Nagy: "the mental process of identifying the representing 'this' with the represented 'that.'" "Aha," Keats the craftsman/*ephēbē* is inviting the initiate into his poem to realize, "the 'western islands . . . / Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold' are Homeric Greece!" (This process, incidently, elucidates James Joyce's use of "epiphany.") Unfortunately, for Keats the Homeric *tópos* is only a rumor of which he has merely "been told." The primary reason is that, as the decidedly underprivileged, counter-Byronic son of a Cockney ostler, he is doomed to know Homer through the veil of translation alone. The

“advent’rous” Miltonic *clinamen* that the surprising jog from “deep-brow’d [that is, “literary,” “authoritative”] Homer” to “stout Cortez” represents will be cut short by consumption (tuberculosis) “before high-pilèd books, in charact’ry,/ Hold like rich garners their full-ripen’d grain,” as he will write in the sonnet “When I have fears” near the end of his life in 1821. Thus it is that in 1818 Keats writes a sonnet “To Homer” which is, in effect, a pessimistic progress-report on the plan he had envisioned in “Chapman’s Homer.” As it “To Homer” opens, Keats is “standing aloof in giant ignorance”—alluding in large part to his lack of Greek. This line prefigures the famous lament that closes “When I have fears”: “. . . [T]hen on the shore / Of the wide world I stand alone, and think / Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.”

I ask the reader to assimilate my explication of the tension between Lucretian and Bloomean *clinamen* when I discuss the paradox of Homeric historical *auctoritas* in Pope’s “Preface” and in Book II of the *Scienza Nuova*.

With these differences in mind, let us count in how many senses Pope endeavor does satisfy Bentley's stringent criteria. First, there is the semantic problem. According to the nephew, Pope's grand scheme was apparently to disregard the historical context of Homer completely. His translation will thus necessarily become something utterly changed from Bentley’s ideal “true Homer.” Perhaps the most intriguing question regarding the method of translation-as-

transformation is what Pope's true motive is. Does Pope really do it as a experiment in "modernization," as Bentley reprovngly remarks, or is he driven in that direction by an educational shortcoming? A related problem resides in Pope's source-text for the translation coming—according to a second-hand source—at third hand. The natural question that occurs to one is whether Pope's knowledge of Homeric Greek is actually as horrid as this second-hand account charges.

Maynard Mack's biography of Pope supports the idea that his critics on this issue were exaggerating, if not just plain wrong. After citing Bentley's famous dismissal, Mack comments:

Pamphleteers . . . would reiterate for years that the translator of had no Greek. All such warnings went unbrooked, since the generality of readers had found in the translation, as the demand for new editions throughout Pope's lifetime and for a century after indicates that they did, a poem which at the very least had to be acknowledged, in Coleridge's phrase "an astounding product of matchless talent and ingenuity," and could be acclaimed, as it was by Johnson, "the noblest version [i.e. translation] of poetry which the world as ever seen."²

Earlier (pp. 44-47), Mack had stressed the lasting impression John Ogilbie's 1660 translation of the *Iliad* had made upon Pope as a boy. It spurred him on to study the Classical languages. It remains unclear, however, exactly how Pope

² *Alexander Pope: A Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, in conjunction with Yale U. Press, 1985), p. 348.

learned to read Homer in Greek. Since he was Catholic, he could not go to University. The usual story is that he learned Latin from his mother and aunt and Greek from “local priests.” If we are to believe the poet *ipse*, he basically taught himself the language, just as he did French and Italian. In a relatively late (1737) autobiographical couplet imitating lines from the Second Epistle of the Second Book by Horace, Pope identifies with his Roman precursor:

Bred up at home, full early I begun
To read in Greek the wrath of Peleus' son.

Horace's lines are:

Romae nutriri mihi contigit atque doceri
iratus Grais quantum nocuisset Achilles.

“It was my lot to be ‘bred up’ at Rome and to be taught/
How much harm irate Achilles did to the Greeks.” (my translation)

Might I suggest that Pope's having been “home-schooled” may have played a role in the “pamphleteering” against his qualifications to render the archetypal epic?

Very much in line with Mack's suspicions, Levine supplies a further set of motives for Bentley's calumny against Pope:

Bentley had his own designs on Homer (a critical edition of the text), and his own ideas about Homer, each of which might well have redirected [page 100] the controversy. He was dissatisfied with the state of the original text, and wished to correct and amend it by consulting the rich manuscript tradition. . . . In a casual passage in one of his works [*Remarks upon a Discourse of Free-Thinking in a Letter to F.H.D.D.* (London, 1713), p. 18], Bentley described Homer as “a simple and careless rhapsodist, singing for a living in a primitive society long since past.” (pp. 99-100)

Levine's insights prompt several thoughts. First, they indicate an obvious jealousy on Bentley's part, the source clearly being Pope's literary success. The various editions of Pope's *Iliad* published during his lifetime made him rich. Bentley was doubtless certain that as a true "philologist," he was far better qualified than Pope to render Homer accurately. (His feeling of superiority to the poet Pope ties in marvelously with the numerous complaints made at the time about Pope's gratuitous "smoothing" of Homer's crudities.) Nevertheless, Bentley suffered from two patent handicaps in this regard. The immediate one was that he never did manage to produce the planned "critical edition," which, one senses, he hoped would "expose" Pope's popular one as "un-Homeric." The slightly removed but equally pragmatic problem was that (as Steven Shankman has expressed it to me in personal correspondence) Bentley was "a good grammarian but a lousy poet." Levine's comments lead us to why Bentley's failure is lamentable from our standpoint: he could have left us a pioneering English translation based on linguistic principles rather than on "the anxiety of influence." And he includes an even more arresting epiphany by Bentley—i.e., that the "texts" are only vestiges of an ultimately unrecoverable oral tradition. The question ultimately becomes whether to view him as a maverick forerunner or a child of the Quarrel.

Meanwhile, evidence from Pope's Preface to his 1720 translation suggests that he knew Homeric Greek relatively well. It ends with these remarks:

Lastly, if we consider his versification, we shall be sensible what a share of praise is due to his invention in that also. He was not satisfied with the language as he found it settled in any one part of Greece, but searched through its different dialects with this particular view, to beautify and perfect his numbers; he considered these as they had a greater mixture of vowels or consonants, and accordingly employed them as the verse required either a greater smoothness or strength. What he most affected was the Ionic, which has a peculiar sweetness, from its never using contractions,³ and from its custom of resolving the diphthongs into two syllables, so as to make the words open themselves with a more spreading and sonorous fluency. With this he mingled the Attic contractions, the broader Doric, and the feebler Æolic, which often rejects its aspirate, or takes off its accent, and completed this variety by altering some letters with the licence of poetry. Thus his measures, instead of being fetters to his sense, were always in readiness to run along with the warmth of his rapture, and even to give a further representation of his notions, in the correspondence of their sounds to what they signified. . . . If the Grecian poet has not been so frequently celebrated on this account as the Roman, the only reason is, that fewer critics have understood one language than the other. Dionysius of Halicarnassus has pointed out many of our author's beauties in this kind, in his treatise of the Composition of Words. It suffices at present to observe of his numbers, that they flow with so much ease, as to make one imagine Homer had no other care than to transcribe as fast as the Muses dictated, and, at the same time, with so much force and inspiriting vigour, that they awaken and raise us like the sound of a trumpet. They roll along as a plentiful

³ Prior to the working out of the phonemic value of the semi-vowel F, the so-called "contractions" and "diphthongs" were quite an obstacle to understanding the Homeric dactylic hexameter. Pope's assessment implies that he was unaware of this discovery. Note, however, that credit for being "ahead of the times" in resolving this problem still goes to the "Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns" though Bentley's insights.

river, always in motion, and always full; while we are borne away by a tide of verse, the most rapid, and yet the most smooth imaginable.

Compare the *Oxford Classical Dictionary's* information on the same subject:

The language in which the poems are composed contains a mixture of forms found in different areas of the Greek world. The overall flavour is Ionic, the dialect spoken on Euboea, other islands of the eastern Aegean such as Chios, and on the mainland of Asia Minor opposite them. Attic Greek was a subdivision of Ionic, but Atticisms in the epic dialect are rare and superficial. Second in importance to Ionic in the amalgam is Aolic, the dialect of north Greece (Boeotia and Thessaly) and the northern islands such as Lesbos. Where Aeolic had a different form Ionic, the Aeolic form mostly appears as an alternative to the Ionic in the epic language when it has a different metrical value [my emphasis]. Most deeply embedded are certain words and forms which belonged to the dialect of southern Greece in the Mycenaean age, sometimes described as Arcado-Cypriot, because it survived into historical times in those two widely separated areas of the Greek world. (p. 719)

Juxtaposing these two descriptions of Homeric Greek, I argue, mitigates both the standard view that Pope's Greek was deficient for his day, and the assumption that modern linguistics and archeology have taken us that very far beyond the *basic* seventeenth-century concept of the Homeric poet. Several things Pope states in his Preface are still generally accepted. To support this point, I recapitulate what both Pope and the *OCD* say: Homeric Greek *is* in an amalgamated form that was never spoken. It *is* a mixture of dialects, primarily Ionic and Aeolic. There *is indeed* an Attic element, though it accreted late and is statistically minor. (These Atticisms are the "result," as it were, of Nagy's Period

4.) Moreover, Pope is right to say that “fewer critics have understood one language [Greek] than the other [Latin].” (This last observation, incidentally, applies quite readily to Vico.) The only amusingly egregious error Pope makes here from the standpoint of modern theory is to conclude that Homer “was not satisfied with his language as he found it settled in any one part of Greece, but searched through its different dialects with this particular view, to beautify and perfect his numbers; he considered these as they had a greater mixture of vowels or consonants, and accordingly employed them as the verse required either a greater smoothness or strength.” We smile because this remark gives us a picture of Homer as a highly *literate*, well-traveled, deliberating polymath who composed his poems through a very sophisticated knowledge of synchronically available Panhellenic choices. (One is reminded of a similar commonplace “mystery” about Shakespeare the “Jack-of-all-trades” that still has influence.) Nevertheless, lest we smirk with Postmodern self-satisfaction at the present-day desuetude this assumption, we must concede that the *OCD*'s assertion that Aeolic forms served as convenient metrical *alternatives* to the predominant Ionic is not far “advanced” from Pope’s conception. As an example of another comparable “modern” interpretation, there is the principle Milman Parry demonstrates in his earliest paper that the positions in which Homeric epithets occur are determined by the immediate metrical environment rather than by

whether the epithet is apt to the characters they nominally describe. The following quote epitomizes the primacy in Parry's early model of metrical dynamics over dialectical consistency:

[P]roof of the traditional character of the language does not lie in the fact that numerous forms are found in Homer which can be classed as Aeolic or archaic: the presence of a Doric form in Aeschylus does not prove that he had borrowed the form from an earlier poet. The proof is rather that the dialectical and artificial elements of the language of Homer constitute a system at once characterized by great extension and by great simplicity. Put, for example, Ionic endings next to corresponding non-Ionic endings . . . , put Ionic words next to non-Ionic words . . . , and you will find in both cases that the corresponding forms or words are almost always of different metrical value.⁴

Note that Parry hastens to place an oral *télos* against a literary one in order to stress Homeric choice (compare Nagy's phrase "re-composition-in-performance") over the static quality of Aeschylus' formal use of the Doric in his choral songs only, which had little to do with metrical exigencies *per se*. I strongly contend that, apart from Pope's conception of Homer as a writer rather than a "reciter," his observation that the dialect Homer "most affected was the Ionic," etc., is actually not that far-removed from Parry's model. Obviously, the difference is that the current *sine qua non* of Homeric theory is that what we have is a literate culmination of a very long oral tradition; yet even this *datum* depends heavily

⁴ *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 6.

on the element of choice. In my opinion, the *OCD* analysis ultimately does not contradict Pope's central (and, from his vantage-point, entirely self-evident) observation that what we possess as Homer reflects the genius of one culminating individual. I repeat my question: Does this picture differ that much in its general implications from the "contemporary" one which the *OCD* proffers?

As a corollary to this argument, I focus for a moment on Pope's attribution in the Preface of "smoothness" to Homer's versification. This opinion is suggestive of the most common disparagement that critics leveled against his translation when it first appeared—namely, that his version gratuitously "corrects" Homer's flagrant crudity. I suggest that crediting Pope with competent Greek delimits his own use of "smoothness" in the "Preface" specifically to the need to capture the compelling regularity of the Homeric dactylic hexameter.

Penelope Wilson has commented on the ambivalent reception of Pope's "outcome":

It is an oddity of literary history that in giving voice so consummately in some ways to the "group-consciousness of an age" [to quote E.M.W. Tilyard] Pope's version of Homer quickly becomes a trigger for its own stylistic rejection, and for a movement variously back to the Greek (for those who could manage it), to the literal, or to Chapman.⁵

⁵ "Homer and English epic," *The Cambridge Companion to Homer* (Cambridge U. Press, 2004), p. 284.

The phrase “quickly becomes a trigger for its own stylistic rejection” is rather opaque, but it seems that she means that the goal of his “version” (hearkening back to the eighteenth-century meaning, “translation”) is euphemistic—or, to be more generous concerning the sophistication of his enterprise, paradoxical. Is the primary impetus of his translation Homer, or is it in reality the English epic poets Chapman and Milton, or does it fluctuate? One need only look toward Richmond Lattimore’s admirable translations as a standard. Lattimore’s inventive approximations of Homer’s hexameter would have been *prima facie* unimaginable to Pope; when it comes to diction, however, Pope maintains a steadfast ethic of fidelity that very much anticipates Lattimore. In order to demonstrate that this issue has crucial hermeneutic ramifications, I turn to the insights of Steven Shankman.

In his chapter “Oral and Written Styles,” Shankman takes up this very problem of determining what constitutes the proper semantic decorum to Pope. Shankman sees him as taking what amounts to an Aristotelian tack:

Just as Pope wished to take a *via media* with regard to the revival of antiquated words, so he wished to pursue the same path with regard to his retaining the peculiarities of Homer's style. Pope was in fact more interested in the potentialities of a literal translation of Homer that has commonly been supposed, for in the *Iliad* preface he asserts that a “rash Paraphrase” may

lose the Spirit of an Ancient, by deviating into the modern Manners of Expression. If there be sometimes a *Darkness*, there is often a *Light* in Antiquity, which nothing better

preserves than a Version [i.e., "translation"] almost literal.
[Twickenham Edition, vol. 7, p. 17]

Here Pope virtually licenses the lexical calculus that is the mainspring of all twentieth-century translations. Shankman adduces yet more opinion supporting this view:

Insufficient literalness is in fact the major complaint Pope levels against his three most important English predecessors in the feel of Homeric translation. Chapman's Homer is more of a "loose and rambling. . . Paraphrase" [p. 21] than a true translation. Hobbes offers "a correct Explanation of the Sense in general, but for Particulars and Circumstances he continually lopps them, and often omits the most beautiful"; Hobbes's version is wrongly esteemed "a close translation" [pp. 21-22]. . . . Dryden, according to Pope, has not "in some places truly interpreted the Sense, or preserved the Antiquities" [p. 22].⁶

In other words, Pope thinks that Chapman has too strong a tendency to let the *clinamen* inherent in his enterprise as a poet rule over his obligation as a translator to his audience. Hobbes is a political theorist, and so has no business attempting to transmute "the Homeric sublime" in the first place. Dryden is doubly damned; often, he neither understands the Greek properly nor is faithful to the undeniable "first principle" (cf. Aristotle's criterion of moving *apo tōn prōtōn*, "according to first things," in the *Poetics*) that Homer was not "writing" about the English eighteenth century.

⁶ Pope's *Iliad: Homer in the Age of Passion* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press), p. 95.

These citations make it plain that Pope's semantic objective is in reality resolutely the *opposite* of the "modernization" of which Bentley was accusing him. Pope's cognitive goal was accuracy. And, lest one be tempted to assume that he failed to put theory into practice, Shankman provides evidence to the contrary such as this:

At one point in his notes. . . Pope feels compelled to excuse his literal translation of a compound epithet. "Perhaps this Line is translated too close to the Letter," he writes, "and the Epithets might have been omitted. But there are some Traits and Particularities of this Nature, which methinks preserve to the reader the Air of *Homer*." [Twickenham Edition, 7:195] In accordance with this principle Pope will at times even retain many of Homer's formulaic phrases. Pope's "liquid Road" (*Iliad* [translation] I.409), for example, is a literal translation of Homer's formulaic ὕδρα κέλευθα (*Iliad* I.312). . . . So Pope literally translates the Homeric formulaic phrase "starry sky" (οὐρανῶ ἀστερόεντι, *Iliad* Four.44; οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος, *Iliad* Five.769. . .) [p. 99] as "starry Skies" (*Iliad* Four.66) . . . (pp. 98-9)

Given the limitations his own native poetic tradition placed on him, Pope has a greater technical affinity with Lattimore than with Chapman. The upshot is that Pope does not see an inherent conflict between a faithful "version" of Homer and replicating Homeric formulas as literally as Taste would allow.⁷

⁷ The most obvious formal obstruction to a closer generative approximation of the Homeric/Vergilian dactylic hexameter may have been the "heroic couplet" (see Shankman pp. 131-64), which the English Augustans substituted for Miltonic blank verse as befitting epic *gravitas*, as well as satire and mock-epic *bathos*.

As for Pope's awareness that the poems were originally "sung" rather than written down, Steven Shankman provides convincing evidence:

Pope certainly knew that the Homeric poems had at some point been sung, for in *An Essay on the Life, Writings, and Learning of Homer*—which Pope himself revised—Thomas Parnell says that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, although each was originally a unified whole, were brought from Asia to Greece "in several separate Pieces" which were called "Rhapsodies; from whence they who sang them had the Title of *Rhapsodists*." In his *Essay on Homer's Battles* Pope comments that Homer repeats, more often than do his successors in the writing of epic, identical verses that describe the manner in which warriors are killed. The orally delivered nature of Homer's verse is implied in Pope's suggestion that Homer's audience "delighted in those reiterated Verses" and that such verses "have a certain antiquated Harmony not unlike the Burthen of a Song, which the Ear is willing to suffer, and as it were rests upon." (p. 80)

Shankman immediately hypothesizes an ulterior motive for why Pope may have been soft-pedaling the notion of original oral performance:

[T]o stress too often the orally-delivered—which was perhaps to imply the originally *composed*—nature of the Homeric poems was to play directly into the hands of the enemy, that is, the Moderns. For the later seventeenth and in the eighteenth century the conception of Homer as a singer of group of singers was often associated with the theory that the poems were in reality a collection of disconnected and primitive songs that were eventually grouped arbitrarily together under the names "Iliad" and "Odyssey." So, for example, the Abbé—who in Perrault's *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes* (1688-1696) represents the position of the Moderns which suggests that neither of the Homeric poems is a unified whole; both quite probably represent, he says, "Rhapsodies, which mean, in Greek, a collection [or "heap"] of various songs sewn loosely together" ["Rapsodies, qui signifie un amas de plusieurs chansons cousués ensemble."]. (pp. 80-81.)

Hence the background of Pope's enterprise is not only deeper than the level of stylistics, but it also resembles Vico's context.

Pope's interpretation of his own artistic charge in translating Homer clashes with the later Romantic reaction to his final product, especially as Shankman has described Pope's intent to be *more* faithful to Homer, metrically and semantically, than was Chapman. It is largely a matter of what criteria one can reasonably begin with to define "faithfulness." Timothy Webb has provided what amounts to a scholium on Shankman's view with this summary of responses among several Romantics:

The rediscovery [*nota bene*] of Chapman was partly animated by the recognition that he had captured much more of the essence of Homer than Pope because of the greater flexibility of his lines. This seemed to apply even in the case of the *Odyssey* which Chapman translated into rhyming couplets but which still seemed closer to the heroic mode and the "beyond-seas" manner of Homer than the polite and polished formalities of Pope. Chapman went much further in the fourteeners of his *Iliad* yet, in spite of the metaphysical complexities of his writing which hardly reproduced the admired "simplicity" of Homer, responses to his work were strongly positive. It was Chapman's version which [Charles] Lamb used as the basis for *The Adventures of Ulysses*. Lamb's letters provide some suggestive glosses both on his admiration for Chapman (and Homer) and his reservations about other translators. His views are expressed with particular force in response to [William] Godwin's proposal that he modify certain shocking elements in his own book since "We live in squeamish days" and Godwin is afraid of "excluding the female sex from among your

readers.” . . . Lamb defends nearly all of his emphases, referring not so much to his own preferences as to Homer’s original.⁸

When Webb chooses the phrases “essence of Homer” and “flexibility of his lines,” he has characterized the Derridean “difference” that prevents the Romantics from appreciating Pope’s renditions. Completely ignoring the regularity of the Homeric dactylic hexameter, Lamb, *et al.*, seek to transmute Homer into what they consider a more authentic approximation of the Archaic primitive. This Romantic goal of jettisoning Pope’s highly regular verse-forms in exchange for a matrix that can communicate a “faithful” sense of how the European past must really have been is highly ironic, given that one important purpose of maintaining metrical regularity in oral poetry was to promote the faithful perpetuation of cultural Memory, a practice that, in regard to Homeric poetry specifically, actually *discourages* the open renderings which the literary figures Webb mentions above manifestly seek. Notice that Lamb and the others laud Chapman, not because he has translated Homer better than Pope, but because he has “transformed”⁹ Homer rather than translating “him.” Webb touches upon the programmatic confusion involved in the typical Romantic desire to repudiate and “repair” Homeric repetitiousness when he points out that “the metaphysical

⁸ “Homer and the Romantics,” p. 307.

⁹ I use this word differently than does Pamela Schwandt, who demonstrates how Pope is influenced in his translation by other giants in the literary tradition, especially Vergil.

complexities of [Chapman's] writing . . . hardly reproduced the admired 'simplicity' of Homer." This anti-traditional thrust is a permutation of a duality at the very heart of Romantic theory.

Differences in the various Romantic responses to Homer as an antecedent hinge largely on whether the individual receptor had the benefit of a University education. On this matter, I propose a division into three (admittedly generalized) groups. The self-consciously "Greekless" Blake and Wordsworth openly shun the Classical corpus; I assert that neither poet shows great interest in recalling the classics, unless one is willing to count Wordsworth's long poems the *Excursion* and the *Prelude*, which impersonate (a verb Nagy has used to explicate *mímēsthai*—conventionally translated "imitate") the epic form, while simultaneously undercutting the tradition by personalizing the poetic voice. It is no coincidence that Homeric themes and structures are so alien to their poetics.

On the other end of my *ad hoc* spectrum stand Shelley and Byron, whose university educations had a palpable influence on certain of their subjects. Thus, for example, Byron's *Manfred*, Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* all quite flagrantly "Romanticize" Aeschylus. Evidence comes from Mary's 1817 "Preface," which most think Percy actually composed. It includes this homage to tradition:

I have . . . endeavoured to preserve the truth of the elementary principles of human nature, while I have not scrupled to innovate upon their combinations. The *Iliad*, the tragic poetry of Greece [e.g., Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*]—Shakespeare, in the *Tempest*/and *Midsummer Night's Dream*—and most especially Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, conform to this rule; and the most humble novelist, who seeks to confer or receive amusement from his labours, may, without presumption, apply to prose fiction a licence, or rather a rule, from the adoption of which so many exquisite combinations of human feeling have resulted in the highest specimens of poetry.

Unlike Blake and Wordsworth, Byron and the Shelleys are eager for their audience to convey them almost prematurely into the pantheon. For this to happen, Homer must appear as the initiator of both fixed textuality and proto-Shakespearean “exquisite combinations of human feeling.” In Book III, Vico explicitly deplors these two aspects of the received Homer.

Between these poles stand Keats and Coleridge. The Greekless *epebe* Keats is utterly entranced by Hellenic mythology and art; his enduring fascination is reflected most famously by his masterful Anglicization of Classical literary forms such as the Pindaric ode and the (truncated) epic. Yet it is all lamentably second-hand for him. Coleridge makes much of his youthful status as a “Grecian” (i.e., first-rate Greek student) at Christ’s Hospital. He even

becomes fond of “Hellenizing” his initials S.T.C. as ἔστησε, which he claims to be “Punic” Greek for “He hath stood.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Is Coleridge showing off a knowledge of linguistic variety in Roman Carthage (Tripolitania—modern Tripoli, North Africa), during the Second Sophistic?

4. THE *LYRICAL BALLADS*: AN ORAL-EVOLUTIONARY REVISION?

Pope's objective of retaining Homeric patterns in his translation exposes a complex irony. Not a few in the next generation actually accused him of undue influence on the galling artificialities of late eighteenth-century poetics.

Prominent among them is Coleridge, who states in the *Biographia Literaria* that Pope's "translations of Homer, which I do not stand alone in regarding as the main source of our pseudo-poetic diction."¹¹ This insult requires a gloss. It was published in 1817, almost a generation after the appearance of Coleridge's "revolutionary" collaboration with Wordsworth, the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798. The Preface to the first edition of this volume, written mainly by Wordsworth with Coleridge's "approval," seems to foreshadow the latter's criticism of Pope. My connection here of this new aesthetic with the Romantic criticism of Pope's approach falls in line with Shankman's observation:

A little more than a decade later [than the above quote from Coleridge, i.e., in 1831] Robert Southey would write that 'Pope's Homer has done more than. . . all the books, towards the corruption of our poetry.' Coleridge implies that the alleged mannerisms are examples of the translator's meticulous refinement of Homer's style.

¹¹ Bate-Engell edition

This is, however, only partially true. . . [p. 100] It is one of the ironies of literary history that the alleged mannerisms Pope's Homer are usually attributed the translators refinement of Homer's style; for much of the diction to which critics such as Coleridge object is the direct result of Pope's attempt to avoid what had come to be viewed in the early eighteenth century as the . . . stylistic fussiness . . . of the modern age. (pp. 99-100)

Another way of expressing this irony is to say that Pope's desire to replicate the iterative patterns of Homeric poetry reenacts, on the most basic formal level, a "language of men speaking to men," as Coleridge and Wordsworth were to frame their own poetic objective. To give the matter an even more pertinent and iconic cast, let us say "of men *singing* to men."

Timothy Webb has actually cited the Coleridge-Wordsworth revolution as a motive for rejecting Pope's Homer specifically:

Resistance to Pope is exemplified by the ways in which one passage in particular had been selected for critical analysis. This was Homer's description of the campfires of the Greeks the night before battle, which leads into the simile of the moon and stars (8.685–708 in Pope's translation). Pope told his readers: 'This comparison is inferior to none in *Homer*. It is the most beautiful Nightpiece that can be found in Poetry.' Although his note offers some scholarly purchase, Pope is concerned to indicate that, although he is aware of concerns of scholarship, poetry has its own superior allegiances. . . .

[[In his *Essay Supplementary to the Preface* [to the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1815) Wordsworth] selects . . . [the Nightpiece] as the focus of an attack on a poetic diction which is dangerously distanced from the objects it describes: "A blind man in the habit of attending accurately to descriptions casually dropped from the lips of those around him, might readily depict their appearances with more truth." (p. 306)

Coleridge and Wordsworth are taking on two figures simultaneously—Pope first and Homer second. Pope’s translation is too remote from his model—as Webb says, “dangerously distanced.” Thus at first blush their target seems to be *English Augustan* decorum and other native historical poetic models they are endeavoring to replace with “the language of men speaking to men.” This reading conforms with Webb’s assertion that “Wordsworth was much concerned with Pope.” Yet the reference to “a blind man,” etc., seems a thinly veiled *sêma* of the archetypal oral bard. Is Wordsworth invoking Homer by comparing written composition unfavorably with “casually dropped” speech segments overheard by his image of *rhapsoidoi* / *aeiodoi*? (cf. *epōs*, the word which Nagy and his colleagues use to designate both a “poetic utterance” and the Homeric dactylic hexameter in general.) If this is what Wordsworth is trying to do, then his phrase “might readily depict their appearances with more truth” can be interpreted as meaning that oral composition is inherently a more “truthful” medium than outworn literary modes are capable of imitating. There is another reasonable but conflicting way of understanding what Wordsworth is trying to say. It is actually more likely that he means something like “Even an amateur with a completely hit-or-miss, ‘spontaneous’ approach could have done better than Pope at translating Homer.”

This interpretation brings up a caveat about Wordsworth's immortal claim that "Poetry is . . . the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling recollected in tranquility." The structure of this maxim influences one to believe at first that he considered poetic composition a matter of immediate performance. If this were the case, one could argue that his conception has an obvious affinity with Nagy's principle of "recomposition-in-performance." But the second half of Wordsworth's statement sublates this interpretation; some undetermined time after the emotive response to stimuli must come the time-honored, formal anamnesis that precludes strict spontaneity.

It is all a ruse. The rejection of Pope in the 1815 Preface is a subversion that expands upon the following observation from the "Advertisement" to the original 1798 Edition:

It is the honourable characteristic of Poetry that its materials are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind. The evidence of this fact is to be sought, not in the writings of Critics, but in those of Poets themselves.

Their proclamation here amounts to chicanery, since the authors are actually endeavoring to be arbiters of a new formalized Taste which they themselves hope to establish. The phrase "writings of Critics" refers not merely to a group they identify as "readers accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers," but subtextually to Aristotle, Boileau, Johnson, and so forth. At the same time, Coleridge and Wordsworth candidly admit to an

agenda that is completely antithetical to any formal vatic impersonation such as one finds in Milton's Homeric re-enactment that serves as the effectual coda to the Proem of *Paradise Lost*: "Sing, Heavenly Muse." Our tandem get the jump by some 120 years on the Russian Formalist aesthetic concept of *ostrannenie* (variously translated as "estrangement" and "defamiliarization") when they warn that "if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, [readers] will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title." The two experimenters hope that readers will "consent to be pleased in spite of that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision." In support of my point that (despite their revolutionary pose) Wordsworth and Coleridge are really solicitous of legitimacy within both the poetic and the critical traditions, I stress that their fulcrum-principle of stimulating pleasure consciously evokes Aristotle's thesis in the *Poetics* that "the pleasure felt in things imitated" is "universal."

Every time I read the relatively terse 1798 "Advertisement," I am struck by the modern sound of this concept that "pre-established codes of decision" are inimical to aesthetic enjoyment. In advance of our disciplines of semiotics and reader-response criticism, Coleridge and Wordsworth put their finger on how

poetry should actually function once it has been cleansed of hackneyed devices. Yet over the years, this issue became a source of acrimony between them. In his famous comments in Chapter IV of the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge says that he and Wordsworth eventually parted company over what their experiment actually constituted. The break began as the result of their own division of labor within this “r/Romantic” project. Note that this label was already designating an “anti-self-conscious” (Geoffrey Hartman’s fecund coinage) program as early as 1817—and probably considerably earlier), with Coleridge taking on the “supernatural” (i.e., “Gothic”) branch and Wordsworth the “rustic” one. At first Coleridge seems to present the problem as a disagreement over “kind”:

To the second edition . . . [Wordsworth] added a preface of considerable length; in which notwithstanding some passages of apparently a contrary import, he was understood to contend for the extension of this style to poetry of all kinds, and to reject as vicious and indefensible all phrases and forms of style that were not included in what he (unfortunately, I think, adopting an equivocal expression) called the language of *real* life.

Coleridge argues here that Wordsworth was wrongly attempting to exclude anything as poetry that might resemble any poetry that one might have seen before, carrying the “inane phraseology” issue to its logical conclusion. The charge seems to be that Wordsworth had become fashionable among the youthful elite by writing poems that expressly exhibited a “minimal verse value,”

so to speak. Shortly, however, Coleridge makes a positive statement about his own concept that presents their disagreement more as one over “degree”:

A poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control (*laxis effertur habenis* [it is carried onwards with loose reins]) reveals itself in the *balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities* [my emphasis]: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry.

Coleridge’s renowned dialectal description here of the poet’s activity as demanding a necessary tension, or disciplined movement, between expectation and innovation reflects crucial differences in the two men’s backgrounds and personalities which—with apologies, again, to those who object to introducing biographical analysis—go a long way toward explaining the bifurcation of their joint endeavor. Wordsworth was a dour, taciturn man from the north of England who, though not ignorant of the poetic tradition, does not seem to have been especially enthralled by it. I argue that of the two, it is more characteristic

that Wordsworth should try to reject the tradition as far as possible in the interest of breaking aesthetic ground. Coleridge, on the other hand, was widely known for his prolixity and broad curiosity. Moreover, as is clear from the opening chapters of the *Biographia Literaria*, he took pride in having acquired a strong knowledge of the classics if the despite having attended a charity school, Christ's Hospital, as a boy. The point is that Coleridge believes fervently that "poetry" is impossible without an acknowledgment of the poetic tradition that the reader will recognize instantaneously.

This perspective takes us back to Wilson, who holds that "stylistic rejection," as she calls it, foiled Pope's project:

Let Homer's reader's think, urges Pope in his "Preface," that "they are growing acquainted with nations and people that are now no more; that they are stepping almost three thousand years back into the remotest antiquity"; but in a sense Pope brought Homer too close, and that was not, ultimately, what the next age wanted, with its appetite for nostalgia and estrangement. (p. 284)

Let us reflect on what she is arguing. We assume that when she says that Pope's *Iliad* was "too close" to its audience, she means that it shows too much influence from recent English epics. The "next age" to which she refers is the Romantic period, of which Vico was a harbinger. Her phrase "nostalgia and estrangement" (once again, here is the Formalist *ostrannenie* concept) expresses the longing (*Sensucht*—to borrow a favorite word of Goethe's *Sturm und Drang* anti-hero, young Werther) for primal times that are somehow unrecoverable through the

written word.¹² Supposedly this was an element that Pope constantly, and quite unwisely, redacted out.

Wilson's view is vindicated by the fact that, despite all of the revolutionary interpretations of Homer as a cultural phenomenon that appeared between 1791 and 1850 (the date of Wordsworth's death), no new English translations of Homer that have the status of Pope's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* appeared. Nonetheless, myriad versions were attempted.¹³ A *semeion* of how perceptions

¹² James Macpherson's wildly successful 1795 literary hoax *The Poems of Ossian* (N.B. its proximity to both the 1791 "discovery" of Venetus Marcius Graecus 454 and F.A. Wolf's *Prolegomena*, also 1795) is undoubtedly the best indicator of this longing. Goethe, for instance, swallowed it whole: he quotes long passages in his novella. In a sense, *Ossian* amusingly replicates the "Homeric Problem" as we still face it today: How can one reconcile the concept of a long, polysemious oral tradition with a synchronic and remarkably unified "text"?

¹³ On the Internet, Ian C. Johnson of the University of Nanaimo is compiling a definitive list of English translations published from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Here is a selection:

- James Macpherson [!] (London, 1773), prose.
- William Cowper (London, 1791). Blank verse. (Complete Text)
- William Tremenheere (London, 1792)
- William Lucas Collins (Philadelphia, 1800-75)
- P. Williams (London, 1806) Blank verse.
- James Morrice (London, 1809) (blank verse)
- Henry Francis Cary (Oxford, 1821) (prose)
- William Sotheby (London, 1831) Heroic couplets.
- John Frederick William Herschel (London, 1844) "Accentuated hexameters."
- T. Brandreth (London, 1846) "Drumming decasyllables."
- William Munford (Boston, Mass., 1846)
- Hamilton Bryce (1847)
- Theodore Alois Buckley (London, 1853) "Literally translated," prose.

of the task evolved is provided by Edward, 14th Earl of Derby, who essayed it in 1864. In his "Introduction," he explains why a new translation is in order:

First, I fear that the taste for, and appreciation of, Classical Literature, are greatly on the decline; next, those who have kept up their Classical studies, and are able to read and enjoy the original, will hardly take an interest in a mere translation; while the English reader, unacquainted with Greek, will naturally prefer the harmonious versification and polished brilliancy of Pope's translation; with which, as a happy adaptation of the Homeric story

-
- William George Thomas Barter (London, 1854) Spenserian stanzas.
 Hamilton and Clark (Philadelphia, 1855-58)
 F. W. Newman (London, 1856) "Unrhymed English metre"
 J. C. Wright (Cambridge, 1861)
 Edward George Geoffrey Smith Stanley, Earl of Derby (London, 1864) Blank verse. (Complete Text)
 Thomas Starling Norgate (London, 1864). Blank verse.
 J. H. Dart (London, 1865). Hexameter verse.
 Edwin W. Simcox (London, 1865). Hexameter verse.
 Charles William Bateman (Dublin, 1867). "Literally translated."
 James Inglis Cochrane (Edinburgh, 1867). Hexameter verse.
 Charles Merivale (London 1869). Rhymed verse.
 William Lucas Collins (Philadelphia, 1869)
 William Cullen Bryant (Boston, Mass., 1870). Blank verse.
 W. G. Caldcleugh (Philadelphia, 1870). Verse.
 John Benson Rose (London, 1874). Blank verse.
 Charles Bagot Cayley (London, 1876). "Homometrically translated"
 Roscoe Mongan (London, 1879-80)
 Alfred John Church (Rochester, 1880)
 Herbert Hailstone (Cambridge, 1881). Literal prose translation
 Andrew Lang, Walter Leaf, Ernest Myers (Boston, 1882). Prose. (Complete text)
 Arthur Sanders Way (London, 1885). English verse.
 John Graham Cordery (London, 1886).
 Thomas Clark (New York, 1888). Interlinear Greek-English
 John Purves (London, 1891)
 Samuel Butler (London, 1898). Prose. (Complete text)

to the spirit of English poetry, I have not the presumption to enter into competition. But, admirable as it is, Pope's *Iliad* can hardly be said to be Homer's *Iliad*; and there may be some who, having lost the familiarity with the original language which they once possessed, may, if I have at all succeeded in my attempt, have recalled to their minds a faint echo of the strains which delighted their earlier days, and may recognize some slight trace of the original perfume.

Note that, presumably because of the middling caliber of intervening translations, Derby must skip back to Pope's to mention one the public might know. Notice also that he makes a specific point of parroting Bentley's criticism: "Pope's *Iliad* can hardly be said to be Homer's *Iliad*." He then claims that a superior rendition of Homer is possible because he is more competent in Greek than Pope was, allowing him to provide those who had studied Homeric Greek in their youth to re-experience the original in some remote-but-felicitous fashion.

What had happened between Pope and the Earl of Derby to permit the Victorian Derby this self-congratulation? Without mentioning Derby, Wilson provides an explanation:

Before the end of the eighteenth century the development of new historical interests would bring about significant changes in the perception of Homer—through Anthony Blackwell's *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735), analysing Homer's genius as a product of particular human circumstances; through the challenge of Ossian in the 1760s and 1770s as not only a national British bard but one at once more primitive and less barbaric than Homer; and perhaps most significantly through the conclusions about the oral nature of the poems on which Wolf was to build his analytical

approach in the *Prolegomena*. It would, however, be a mistake to assume a simple teleological narrative here. As Wolf himself pointed out, the question he had raised about Homer was not new. Comparable ideas had been expressed not only in France by Charles Perrault and the abbe d' Aubignac, but also in England, and in English, by Richard Bentley. (p. 285)

Glaringly absent from Wilson's catalogue of revolutionary Homerists is Vico.

For a telling comparison with Pope, Bentley, *et al.*, there is Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)—of a different generation, and a contentious frame of mind.

Shankman has commented as follows:

It may well be the Johnson's hesitation to associate the Homeric poems with oral recitation is the direct result of his opposition to any theory which would suggest that the poems were not unified. Boswell, for example, reports that Johnson, in response to a remark that "Homer was made up of detached fragments," denied this; observing, that you could not put a book of the *Iliad* out of its place; and the believed the same might be said of the *Odyssey*" [*The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1909, p. 128.]. (p. 82)

Johnson clearly desires to think of "Homer" as one poet who created a unified corpus. Shankman argues that he is taking a Unitarian position as a reaction against the theories emphasizing fragmentation that had previously prevailed. I do not think it unreasonable to speculate that Johnson's perspective discloses an agenda: his insistence upon one authorial *persona* pre-establishes the epic genre in his own paradigm as the natural medium for Vergil, but most especially for the native English genius of Spenser and Milton as he describes it in *Lives of the*

Poets.

This theme of seeking to accommodate Homeric “multeity-in-unity” (Coleridge’s description of a dialectical relationship) within the bounds of a “fixed text” has by no means seen its last. Returning to Robert Fowler’s summary of the Homeric Question cited above, I wish to counter his assertion that “the premise that Homer lived in an illiterate age” is now almost universally considered “false.” Most current theories of Homer specifically posit a quite long pre-literate tradition during which “(re)composition-in-performance” took place. The confusion hinges in great part on the semiotics of “Homer.” The problem is actually one of reference. Does this proper noun refer properly to a culminating persona, or is it better understood as the convenient/necessary syncopation of a tradition? Present-day theories generally connect the fixing of the two major Homeric “texts” (a word, by the way, that puts Nagy off) with their having been “encoded” in writing. In this vein, Nagy’s periods 3-5 posit a gradual, inevitable *terminus a quo* of the Homeric “evolution” into a single cultural icon.

5. BOOK III: IN SEARCH OF VICO'S "EMPIRICAL" HOMER

Again, Book III represents the polemical fulcrum of Vico's entry into The Homeric Question. Its specific *télos* is the promise he has made (primarily in "The Idea of the Work) that through the anti-Cartesian method of his "new science" he intends to argue that behind the received Homeric icon— the synchronic, historical, majestically authoritative figure depicted throughout the Classical corpus—has lain hidden ("ignotus latebat," as it were) all along an archaic succession of illiterate, peripatetic *caratteri* (archetypes), among whose empirical indicators is the Neapolitan *cantastorie*. Despite this "scientific" perspective, the problem of interpreting Vico's treatment of Homer in Book III resembles that concerning Pope. The basic issue is whether, compared with other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theorists (especially talented Classical philologists like Bentley, Kuster, and Wolf), Vico was "equipped" to address the Homeric Question in the first place. It is a largely a matter of assessing his place in Neapolitan intellectual life. As I have stressed, he has been portrayed overwhelmingly as an outsider and latecomer. Joseph Mali says,

Vico's so-called "Discovery of the True Homer". . . could have [fomented] a major change had it been made known to wider and higher circles of scholars. When Friedrich August Wolf published his *Prolegomena ad Homerum* in 1795, in which he established a similar theory (on independent and much superior scholarship), Vico's thesis was still virtually unknown. In fact Vico himself

reaches momentous conclusions only the only in the latest stages of his work and life. (*Rehabilitation*, p. 190)

Mali further argues that the typical picture of Vico as a prophetic voice has perhaps given him more credit than he deserves:

Of all the legends surrounding the man and his work, the legend of Vico the forerunner, the sage who grasped and expressed many truths of the future, has proven the most attractive, though hardly the most constructive [my emphasis], to interpreters of his work. . . . [M]any modern readers of the *New Science* believe, genuinely enough, to have discovered in its cryptic formulations affinities, or even outright solutions, to their own research problems. . . . The Vichian industry of recent years has produced some remarkable, if ever more bizarre, samples of comparative studies, all implying Vichian intimations of our modern, all too modern theories. (*ibid.*, pp. 1-2)

Mali evidently has in mind studies such as the collection of lectures given at Columbia University's Casa Italiana in 1976 and published under the title *Vico and Contemporary Thought* (Gorgio Tagliacozzo, Michael Mooney, and Donald Phillip Verene, eds. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979). In any event, his claim that Vico's work on Homer was "virtually unknown" invites scrutiny because it misrepresents several things. While it is true that Vico had a lot of anxiety about his place in the European intellectual community, he was by no means as "isolated" as he obviously thought he was. Bear in mind that his ideas on Homer were a matter of public record (at least in an embryonic form) as early as 1725, in what is known as the *First New Science*.

As he elaborated his paradigm toward its final 1744 manifestation, it did receive attention, however critical, from the audience he was seeking to impress.

That Wolf felt a need to generate a critical response to the contents of Book III at all indicates that Vico's ideas were well enough known to have exercised the great German philologist's academic bile. Wolf's attitude toward Vico's presumptuousness shows that Wolf's "independent and much superior scholarship" has actually seduced Mali into making the error of believing that Vico ever intended to compete with European philologists on their own terms. An overview of Vico's *opus* reveals that the most prominent objects of his intellectual envy were not the likes of Bentley or Wolf but rather Newton and the European social contractarians such as Hobbes, Locke, and von Pufendorf. From this perspective, the portrayal in §877-§878 of itinerant rhapsodes carrying forth *la fabula volgare* for the benefit of future generations is emblematically a narrative "platform" that in the *Scienza Nuova* would eventually make manifest why codified, written Roman law (originally embodied, for Vico, in the Twelve Tables) became necessary in the first place. This movement in Vico's discourse from "the preliterate" to "the literate" provides a completely reasonable basis for the interpretation that the apparent disparity between the "Homer" of Book III and the one of Books II, IV, and V is not really a disparity or an inconsistency,

but rather a shift Vico explores in order to reify his own *fabula* / *mūthos*¹ explaining how and why European culture evolved in the direction it did.

Contrary to what seems to be the conventional wisdom, Vico's supposed

¹ In discriminating this pair of near synonyms, Donald Phillip Verene's opinion in his previously cited article "On Translating Vico" is most enlightening. Of Marsh's choice *mythos* (which I spell throughout this study as *mūthos*) over Bergin and Fisch's cognate "fable" for Vico's *favola*, Verene says this:

Vico is not simply using "fable" as a conventional term in circulation in his day. He also is not just being latinate in his terminology. He is taking fable away from the rationalists – who see it as a term for superstition and falsehood, and from the Euhemerists, who claim fables to be embellishments of historical persons and events – and he is showing that fables are an original form of speech that combines *logos* and *mythos*. Above all, Vico is going against the Greek and Judeo-Christian understanding of *mythos* as fable or fiction, opposed to both *logos* and *historia*, for Vico also sees fables as the first histories. Fables are neither fictions nor the embellishment of historical figures. They are the forms or marks of the original mental language.

The Italian for *mythos* is *mito*, a word which does not appear in the *New Science* (p. 94)

Verene is right to emphasize that Vico is taking advantage of the native, as it were, Dantean force of *favola/favolsi* that the academic *mito* would not have conveyed. His position is especially compatible with my central thesis that Vico's Homer theory as expounded in Book III portrays an oral tradition (cf. my title-page quotations). Yet arguably Marsh's lexis *mūthos* has two advantages. First, it connects Vico directly with Homer, as exemplified in this pleonasm from *Odyssey* 11.561, *hin épos kai mūthon akousēs*, "that you may hear (my) speech and narrative." Let it be duly noted that Liddell and Scott's examples almost all connect *mūthos* with some form of the *spoken* word; also, the entry specifies that *mūthos* is attested earlier than its eventual literary semantic "competitor" *lógos*. Even Aristotle's employment of *mūthos* in the *Poetics* [1447a.8] to mean something like "making a finely wrought story" or "a successful plot" emphasizes *poiēsis* as a re-telling rather than a writing.

A second advantage of Marsh's translation *mūthos* is that it links Vico with modern narrative theory, which owes the *Scienza Nuova* a great debt.

ignorance of Greek was *relative*, not absolute.² I am, perhaps, in the minority in contending that, had he wished to, he could have become a scholar of the Homeric “text.” But the *Scienza nuova*’s overall rhetorical structure demonstrates that the concept of “Homer” as a vestige of a tradition was actually more important as an instrument for Vico in making his famous case in Book V for the *ricorsi* (i.e., the cultural repetitions) of history.

In accordance with Pompa’s more generous view presented above, I respond to Mali by maintaining that “la Discoverta del vero Omero” does initiate current paradigms in major respects. At other junctures in his book Mali grudgingly agrees. Qualifying his original statement that Vico’s reputation as a

² As for Homeric Greek, the consensus seems to be that Vico was quite deficient; the commonplace is that his actual knowledge of the Homeric text was confined to the Latin epitome of Dares and Dictys. But according to Donald Philip Verene, “Having studied *Gester’s Rudiments*, he [=Vico] would have had more than a passing knowledge of Greek.” *Knowledge of Things Human and Divine: Vico’s New Science and Finnegans Wake* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 229, n. 13. In personal correspondence with me, Professor Verene has indicated that in his early education, Vico had a Greek tutor. Verene’s use of the conditional mood reflects a general critical uncertainty as to just how much Greek Vico was capable of. There is still not a great deal of useful information on the subject.

Possibly the most vexing problem that arises from the apparent tenuousness of Vico’s Greek is explaining how so much of his “original” thought can be attributed to a first-hand acquaintance with the unmediated Greek of the ancient authors. The even now indeterminable quality of Vico’s knowledge of Greek as opposed to Latin literature creates yet another field of ambivalence about the gap between what Vico would like to believe he knows, and what he actually does know (cf. his famous *verum/ factum* distinction). This issue becomes particularly important when one considers Vico’s penchant for amalgamating Greek and Roman mythology, and treating the result as if it were history.

“forerunner” is merely “legendary,” he later writes:

Vico’s general theory about the collective creation of the Homeric epics is still considered plausible by modern scholars. And even though very few of them would go with Vico so far as to deny the very existence of the individual poet Homer they are ready, on the whole, to accept his more moderate point and deny the individuality of the Homeric poetry. Vico’s assertion that Homer was only the “binder or compiler of fables” is compatible with Moses Finley’s conclusion [*The World of Odysseus* (N. Y.: the Viking Press 1954), p. 28.], that “the pre-eminence of a Homer lies in the scale on which he worked and in the freshness with which he selected and manipulated what he inherited, in the little variations and inventions he introduced in the stitching . . . [of] certain essentials from what older bards had passed to him” (p. 197).

The nagging conundrum that emerges from this widely accepted generality is: how far can we reasonably claim that Vico actually goes in the direction of the Parry-Lord Hypothesis? Here it is propitious to repeat the mitigating proviso: Vico’s widely accepted ignorance of Greek, French, and English means that he depends on the authority of both his contemporary *epistēmē* (Michel Foucault’s word)³ and Latin writers for his concept of Homer. The irony of this

³ Foucault writes that

. . . [L]’archéologie, s’adressant à l’espace générale du savoir, à ses configurations et au mode d’être des choses, définit des systèmes de simultanéité, ainsi que la série de mutations nécessaires et suffisantes pour circonscrire le seuil d’une positivité nouvelle.”

— From Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966; rpt. 1989), p. 14.

I translate:

dependence is twofold. First, he claims to have a new, superior understanding of Homer even though he was not a “philologist” in the sense that Bentley was. Flowing from this irony is an overarching one: the polemical basis of Vico’s “new science” is only nominally scientific, since he relies throughout the work on (1) earlier (predominantly Classical) sources, and (2) “principles” of history that are unsupported empirically. In other words, though the very target of his basic critique in the *Scienza Nuova* is Cartesian *a priori* epistemology, Vico’s historical model is obviously not, from a modern scientific perspective, a valid *a posteriori* corrective because it depends almost exclusively on the testimony of “trusted” authorities, notably Vergil, Horace, Cicero, Longinus and Plutarch.

If we cannot properly call Vico a “scientist” in our sense, how is it that he successfully, albeit nominally, moves from received authority to original insight on the Homeric Question? The answer, I believe, is by remaining vigilant about Vico’s self-conscious use of etymology to “uncover” the “original genius” of language. Giuseppe Mazzotta has explained the importance of Vico’s diction in

. . . [A]rcheology, as addressing the general field of knowledge (wisdom), its configurations, and the ontological forms of things, defines systems of simultaneity, as well as the series of mutations necessary and sufficient to constitute the threshold of a new phenomenological reality [i.e., a “positivity” in the sense construed by Auguste Comte].

As most Vichian specialists have interpreted the *Scienza Nuova*, it would seem very much to anticipate Foucault’s “archeology of knowledge” projects. I have supplied an alternative translation for Foucault’s *savoir* as “wisdom” to suggest an affinity with the subject of Book II of the *Scienza Nuova*, “The Wisdom [*sapienza*] of the Ancients.”

the title of Book III, "The Discovery [*discoverta*] of the True [*vero*] Homer.":

Within the context of the logical methodology Vico deploys, one could point out the aptness of terms such as "discoverta" and "vero." The term must be seen as a variant of the *inventio*, a category that from Cicero's *Topics* (Section II, par. 6; Section XXI, par. 79) reappears in Ramus, Agricola, Descartes, and Bacon. Bacon, who in his *Novum Organum* makes of *discovery* the principle of any authentic knowing, distinguishes two classes of knowledge: a knowledge based on argument and a knowledge based on a discovery to be pursued through the inductive method. For Vico "discoverta" means the imaginative retrieval of the buried sediment of the past, a bringing to light the hidden truth about Homer by removing, as it were, allegory's integument or the layers of critical distortions weighing on his poetry. (p. 141)

Carrying Mazzotta's phrase "bringing to light" to Vico's own *terminus ad quem* exposes the apocalyptic basis of his grand argument in the *Scienza Nuova*.

Mazzotta himself indicates this; he starts the passage quoted just above with the etymology for *discoverta* derived from Classical sources, but shifts in mid-observation toward the path Vico himself pursues. I agree with Mazzotta; to understand Vico, one must always *discoverta* as "revelation," a simultaneous *exergasia* (expansion via rhetoric) of the cognate "discovery." Doing so conveys Vico's underlying theme that the true *carattere* (here to be understood in the cognate sense) of an age must be "uncovered," that it does not yield its secrets up to those who are not willing to analyze from within an historical context. Thus, Vico's interest is ultimately epistemological. In this vein, Isaiah Berlin has observed that

in addition to the traditional categories of knowledge—a priori/deductive, a posteriori/empirical, that provided by sense perception and that vouchsafed by revelation—there must now be added a new variety, the reconstructive imagination. This type of knowledge is yielded by “entering” into the mental life of other cultures, into a variety of outlooks and ways of life which only the activity of *fantasia*—imagination—makes possible.⁴

Reconstructing lost cultural artefacts and values through the “power of the imagination” (cf. the importance to Kant’s aesthetics of the *Einbildungskraft*) is the seminal goal that sets Vico’s project apart from earlier approaches to Homer. As does the Parry-Lord Hypothesis, Vico’s treatise operates on the ground assumption that the environment in which “Homer” created was a “song-culture.” The crucial thing to recognize is that Vico intends in Book III to move gradually backward, prior to a “Homer” conceived as an individual creative genius from whom we have received a “text,” and argue for a “song-culture” that produced a diachronic line of singers whose chief function is to fulfill the aim of perpetuating cultural Memory. To use an appropriate expansive simile, as Venus lifts Aeneas off the battlefield so that he might eventually found Rome (an incident Vergil himself appropriates and “re-contextualizes” from the *Iliad*, in which Aphrodite whisks Paris away from the fray to Helen’s bedchamber), so this revolutionary paradigm plucks Vico right out of the “Quarrel” so that he may

⁴ *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.11.

found the study of Homer as a cultural phenomenon. Consider the affinity of this design with Nagy's:

My theory . . . has it that theme is the overarching principle in the creation of traditional poetry like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; also, that the formulaic heritage of these compositions is an accurate expression of their thematic heritage. Such a theory helps account for the problems raised by Parry's theory of the formula. Did the poet really *mean* this or that? Did he really *intend* such-and-such an artistic effect? My general answer would be that the artistic intent is indeed present--but that this intent must be assigned not simply to one poet but also to countless generations of previous poets steeped in the same traditions. In other words, I think that the artistry of the Homeric poems is traditional both in diction and in theme. For me the key is not so much the genius of Homer but the genius of the overall poetic tradition that culminated in our *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.⁵

In arguing for similarity here, I add that it would be wrong to think of Vico's strikingly "modern" objective as some kind of eccentric glance aside from his greater plan in the work. His "Idea of the Work" and the accompanying frontispiece make it clear that understanding "the true Homer" means having a good grasp of his "new science" as a whole. To begin to do so, we must take Isaiah Berlin's observation about the operation of *fantasia* in Vico's panorama to heart. From the perspective of the whole *Scienza Nuova*, imagining a preliterate culture with wandering bards, as Vico asks us to do in Book III, makes Homer a kind of linchpin that holds his anthropology together. Nonetheless, there is one

⁵ *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*, revised edition (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. -.

unavoidable, paradoxical, and even troublesome obstacle within his putative *clinamen*, or self-conscious “swerve” from convention.

This tension is a symptom of the pressure to establish his own reputation that one can sense throughout Vico’s work. The commonplace has been that Vico genuinely isolated. This “hermeneutics of isolation” has received strong support from many influential critics. Let us, for example, again consider the opinion of a most respected interpreter: Wilamowitz. His lone mention of Vico in the *History of Classical Scholarship* is as follows:

Naples, where the professional scholars were so little capable of profiting by the treasures that had fallen into their laps, did nevertheless produce one man whose philosophical speculations introduced entirely new and stimulating ideas into the study of history: Gian Battista Vico In many respects, Vico anticipated the ideas of Herder, and insofar as the Romantic movement entailed a shift of emphasis from the individual to the people, from conscious creation to the impersonal march of evolution [*nota bene*], from the highest achievements of culture to its humble beginnings, Vico was its precursor thanks to whom religion and myth came to be understood for the first time. The business of explaining figures like Lycurgus and Homer, of determining what is truth and what is error, was also begun by him. (p. 100)

In the context of Nagy’s “(re-)composition-in-performance” model, Wilamowitz’s compliment to Vico is backhanded. Its very impetus is what Wilamowitz strongly implies to be the relative scholarly ineptitude of the Neapolitans, whom he treats as having possessed textual “treasures” which they were ill-equipped or unworthy to appreciate.

Concerning this notion that early eighteenth-century Naples was “isolated,” and that consequently Vico’s insights were somehow “born of ignorance,”

Giuseppe Mazzotta is a contrarian:

In spite of the steady attention Vico lavishes on the intellectual debates and institutions of his own time, the most common image of Vico is that of a scholar who all his life stayed out of touch with the historical and political realities of his day. The telling sign that he was basically removed, *as is widely supposed* [my emphasis], from the windstorms of the eighteenth century, which engender the entanglements of modern thought, is to be found in the peculiar bent of the *New Science* . . . [which] evokes and is vitally engaged with the intellectual challenges debated a century earlier by the likes of Bacon and other founders of modern thought, such as Machiavelli, Descartes, Galileo, and Hobbes. . . .

It is also believed that because Vico lived in Naples, a city which Gramsci inaccurately called “un angolino morto della stora” (loosely meaning “a dead end of history”), Vico could only have written a work that evades its immediate historical reality. Feeling, as he did, that he was a stranger in his own native city, Vico places the commitment to the politics of the day by the radical project of making the *New Science* a text that pries into the elusive darkness of mythical and distant origins of humanity and thereby drafts the shifty forms of human consciousness. It must be stressed that Vico’s turn to the archeology of the mind and its spectral constructions was never understood—nor could it ever have been understood—as a nostalgia for edenic origins. Rather, it was justly hailed as the consequence of Vico’s discovery and introduction of a new tool of thought into the eighteenth-century landscape of ideas. The new conceptual tool, which would account for the ways the world has been and is likely to be in the future, is history. (*New Map*, Chapter Three, “The History of Modernity,” pp. 65-66)

As Mazzotta points out, the most transparent source of the isolation legend is arguably Vico himself. His “feelings” in turn derive reinforcement from pathetic anecdotes, like his being seen near the end of his life wandering the streets of

Naples alone, avoiding eye-contact with those to whom he had sent copies of his work; and sending a copy to Newton but never getting a response. (These romanticized legends evoke for me the anecdote Charles Lamb tells about another genius who was unappreciated in his day, Coleridge, languishing at Highgate under the onus of laudanum addiction, and hence under in the care of Dr. Gilman, muttering about the importance of making a distinction between “*sum*ject and *om*ject.”) Also, Mazzotta is right to observe that it is quite inaccurate to think of Vico’s Naples as some kind of intellectual backwater.⁶ I only disagree with him when he suggests that Vico’s frame of reference is somehow “belated” (or “from the last century,” as he says). All of the people Mazzotta lists above were still influencing the general controversy that was taking place throughout Europe. Anthony Grafton has characterized Vico’s access to these ideas with a colorful simile: “When he listened in on the great debates of his time from his post in lively but distant Naples, he resembled a country telephone operator trying to eavesdrop on a crackling party line.”⁷ While this image accurately portrays Vico’s personal sense of remoteness and

⁶ For a study that establishes once and for all the intellectual energy and centrality that characterized Naples in Vico’s time, see Harold Samuel Stone, *Vico’s Cultural History: The Production and Transmission of Ideas in Naples, 1685-1750* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997).

⁷ Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, translated by David March, with an “Introduction” by Anthony Grafton (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. xxiii.

exclusion, there is one particular aspect of the *Scienza Nuova* that contradicts it: an informed reading very often reveals correspondences between Vico's language and that of other of his contemporaries. With certain thinkers (primarily Descartes) one should reasonably expect such echoes; Vico seems to have seen himself as constructing a system that would simultaneously incorporate and criticize their principal ideas.

The nexus between Vico's dissatisfaction with Cartesianism and his reliance on language, literature, and history intimates why his works take the forms they do. It has been proposed that Descartes' *a priori* epistemology is virtually the *raison d'être* of the *Scienza Nuova*. Benedetto Croce has written:

[According to Descartes,] all knowledge which had not been or could not be reduced to clear and distinct perception and geometrical deduction was bound to lose. . . all value and importance. This included history, as founded upon testimony; observation of nature, when not within the sphere of mathematics; practical wisdom and eloquence which draw their validity from empirical knowledge of human character; and poetry, with its world of imaginary presentations. Such products of the mind are for Descartes illusions, chaotic visions, rather than knowledge; confused ideas, destined either to become clear and distinct ideas and so no longer to exist in their original nature, or else to drag on [in] a miserable existence unworthy of a philosopher's consideration.

Vico . . . went straight to the heart of the question, to Descartes' criterion of scientific proof itself, the principle of self-evidence. While the French philosopher believed himself to have satisfied all the demands of the strictest science, Vico saw that as a matter of fact, in view of the need which he set out to meet, his

proposed method gave little or no assistance.⁸

Later critics have not contested Croce on the early inception and enduring sincerity of Vico's anti-Cartesian passion. In the "Translator's Introduction" to the English version of Vico's Inaugural Oration *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (*On the Study Methods of Our Time*), delivered 1708 and published in 1709, Elio Gianturco reinforces this argument that Descartes' contempt for the humanities lies at the very core of his Vico's notion of knowledge. Gianturco observes that "Vico's anti-Cartesianism first appears in the *De nostri*, in a form which is as sharp-edged as it is "clear and distinct" (a Cartesian anti-Cartesianism, so to speak)."⁹ Vico would really have appreciated Gianturco's recognition through his pleonasm that "clear and distinct" intuitively applies more readily to empiricist (i.e., phenomenological, scientific, *a posteriori*) epistemologies such as those of Vico and Aristotle than to rationalist (i.e., geometrical, mathematical, *a priori*) systems such as those of Descartes and Plato.

Gianturco connects Vico's attitude with Aristotelian terminology through Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*:

[A]s for *topics*, which Bacon respected, which was the main staple of

⁸ *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, translated by R. G. Collingwood (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), p. 2.

⁹ Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, Elio Gianturco, translator (Cornell University Press, 1990), p. xv.

rhetorical studies, and which the seventeenth-century schools had installed as the queen of the realm of the “probable,” Vico felt that Descartes had completely undermined topics with his theory of clear and distinct perception. (p. xxxii)

Gianturco’s own note on this statement establishes its Aristotelian pedigree:

In Aristotle’s *Organon*, topics is defined as a procedure whereby one may build conclusions from “probable” statements concerning any problem whatsoever, and whereby when speaking in public, one may be protected against self-contradiction. (ibid.)

Cases in which the premises and the conclusion are all *probably* rather than *necessarily* true are examples of induction.” Gianturco’s gloss contains two phrases that explain why Vico would find the “anti-mathematical” topics method so congenial to his purposes: “topics” can apply to “any problem whatsoever,” and so are especially useful for promoting the expansive capabilities of “public speaking,” whose other name, rhetoric, connects Vico with a predecessor like Cicero.

Gianturco begins his exegesis with Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle’s apothegm from *l’Eloge de Brianchini* (1729): “As Fontenelle puts it: ‘Naturally, the genius of mathematical truths and that of profound erudition are opposites: they exclude and despise each other.’” (p. xviii) Pondering what Fontenelle means by “profound erudition,” I suggest he is thinking of the accumulation of texts—literary, religious, philosophical, scientific, or otherwise—that, prior to

Descartes, had signified “knowledge” for most of Europe. Compare Perrault’s phrase *amas de chansons* characterizing how one “experienced” Homer in his time. The other intriguing element of Fontenelle’s quote is his insistence that mathematical and textual knowledge are mutually exclusive to the point of being hostile to one another. What we have here, in effect, is an eerie proto-Hegelian antithesis that offers no prospect of synthesis.¹⁰

Gianturco hits this antipathy theme hard. He remarks, for example:

Descartes made no secret of the very low esteem in which he held languages and rhetorical, literary, and historical studies, and, in general the classical humanities. ... Descartes’ attitude may be accounted for and excused in view of the excessive importance attributed, in his youth, to the study of Greek and Latin. . . . (p. xxxi)

In light of the Cartesian position that rejects historical precedent and artistic discourse as epistemological distractions, one can interpret Vico’s “counter-project,” if you will, as an attempt to reverse the Rationalist tide by writing on subjects that display knowledge that Descartes *has explicitly rejected*. (This interpretation, by the way, works in favor of Mark Lilla, who has argued, quite

¹⁰ Notice that this dichotomy happens to replicate one that fundamentally distinguishes Platonic from Aristotelian epistemology. The motto of the Academy was “Let no one enter who is ignorant of geometry.” On the other hand, Aristotle’s epistemology depends heavily on linguistic analysis (one definition of *to lógikon*) and awareness of the primal origins of Fourth Century cultural forms, both of which exhibit the patently un-Socratic trait of “profound erudition.” Precisely the same consistent antagonism exists between Descartes and Vico.

against the common wisdom of today's critics, that Vico is actually an "anti-modernist.")

I have digressed to argue for Vico's awareness of European philosophical discourse and anti-Cartesian determination to seek an empirical basis for "knowledge" in order to establish a basis for understanding the influence of language theory on his views of antiquity. His penchant for "anthropological etymology," so to speak, has (rather silently) blurred his concept of *scienza*. In the "Introduction" to their translation, Bergin and Fisch have this to say about the interplay of Latin and Italian in the *Scienza Nuova*:

[Because his title at the University of Naples was "Professor of Latin Eloquence,"] [w]e should expect . . . that he would use Italian words of Latin origin with a lively sense of their etymological overtones. It only gradually becomes apparent to us, however, that, when he uses such words for emphasis, as when the key terms of a sentence or clause, it is usually the etymological meaning that is emphasized. (p. xx)

In the spirit of this quite accurate observation, they render an important semantic *triage*:

The initial distinction [Vico makes] . . . is that between *conscienza*, consciousness or conscience, and *scienza*, knowledge or science. *Conscienza* has for its object *il certo*, the certain; that is, particular facts, events, customs, laws, institutions, as careful observations and the sifting of evidence determines them to be, and *scienza* has for its object *il vero*, that is, universal and internal principles. (p. xxx)

As they have put it here, the difference seems more than a little counter-

intuitive, since the consideration of evidence (facts) in the direction of “truth” (albeit provisional) applies, from a modern perspective, more aptly to “science” than to “conscience.” The final aim of science is indeed to discover “universal and eternal principles,” but this teleology presupposes the intermediate consideration of data, which is exactly what Vico believes he is doing on a grand scale. It seems to me that what Bergin and Fisch are actually getting at requires one to lay emphasis on their first definition of *conscienza*—“consciousness,” referring to the primal collective awareness that led humans to organize their cultures. This element of Vico’s paradigm is an example of the appeal to *fantasia* that Isaiah Berlin underscores. On the other hand, *scienza* refers to a *method* for studying the development of *conscienza*. Thus I basically concur with the translators’ conclusion:

[To Vico,] *scienza* of the world of nature, in the strict sense, is . . . reserved for God, who made it. But *scienza* of the world of nations, the civil world, the world of institutions, is possible for men, because men have made it and its principles or causes “are therefore to be found within the modifications of our human mind” [§331]. (p. xxxi)

I demur from this understanding in one respect. For Vico, *scienza* in this sense of “method for acquiring knowledge” does not apply to God, since one of His existential attributes (to use part of St. Anselm’s old argument, which I suspect Vico knew and accepted) is omniscience. A more accurate way to understand

how Vico uses *scienza* is as a compulsory response to Newton and Locke as empiricist “role models,” if you will, as well as a rejection of ultra-rationalist Cartesianism. For Vico, Descartes’ famed “method” was unsatisfactory precisely because he thought it was—by its very *skepsis* regarding anything observed through the senses—devoid of information that could be useful to historical analysis. Thus he conceived of his true quest in the *Scienza Nuova* as being to assemble the sort of array of data which Descartes’ *a priori* principles could not address. In sum, Vico hoped to create a “new science” of cultural history that would have the same intellectual weight as Newton’s “natural philosophy.” I do not think it a distortion to say that Croce shares this basic view.

Vico embraced the empirical very early and held on to it tenaciously. As Harold Stone has remarked:

The primary motive for contemporary interest in [Vico’s propaedeutic essays] *De nostri* [known in English as “On the Study Methods of Our Time”] and *De Antiquissima* [“On the Most Ancient Wisdom”] concerns Vico’s *verum/factum* principle; that is, we only know the things we have made. In terms of Vico’s significant works this runic expression is taken to mean that we have a special ability to understand history, and the human sciences in general, because of the fact that we, as human beings, have made or done these things ourselves.

Given the centrality of this idea for interpretators [sic] of Vico’s thought it is not surprising that it has been closely examined and origins for it had been widely explored. Some see this idea as a kind of master key to Vico mature thought; some give it a parallel status to Descartes’ *cogito* and make it an axiom for his science [this is my position]; others find in it Vico’s discovery of a particular and new kind of knowledge, a kind of understanding that only comes

from an insider's experience. And it has been argued by others that the statement was little more than common sense; and some Vico scholars will deny it has any serious significance for the *Scienza Nuova*. (pp. 180-1)

Behind Stone's observation is an implicit comparison which derives from the difference between divine and human ways of knowing. For Vico, knowing something prior to its sensible form is a capacity that is solely divine. Conversely, human knowledge consists of organizing and understanding things *already made or accomplished*. This is the epistemological bias of a historian, legal scholar, and *filólogo* who is not interested in Cartesian geometrical abstraction. It is the same bias that stimulates Aristotle's point-by-point critique in the *Politics* of Plato's "three waves" that would shape the ideal *polis*. I reiterate that, in spite of what Vico himself may have believed, it is wrong to think of his theories as based on the kind of evidence yielded up by scientific evidence, *per se*. What he presents as "support data" are, as often as not, appeals to authority and tacit entreaties for his audience to accept his broad proto-sociological premises. An excellent example is this claim:

§879. . . . Homer composed the *Iliad* in his youth, that is, when Greece was young and consequently seething with sublime passions, such as pride, wrath, and lust for vengeance [e.g., Achilles' quarrel with Agammemnon and his kinetic rage at Patroklos' death], passions which do not tolerate dissimulation but which love magnanimity [e.g., acceding to Priam's supplications by returning Hektor's body]; and hence this Greece admires Achilles, the hero of violence. But he wrote the *Odyssey* in his old age, that is, when the

spirits of Greece had been somewhat cooled by reflection [*viz.*, the Odyssean epithet *polúmēthis*], which is the mother of prudence, so that it admired Ulysses, the hero of wisdom. . . .

Vico seems at first to be speaking of one actual individual, whom we call Homer, advancing through a single lifetime. But his phrase “spirits of Greece” expands the passage of time to generations; “Homer” becomes a metonym for the cultural niche, if you will, that poets occupied in Archaic Greece. In other words, “Homer’s” two poems reflect the evolution of Hellenic culture from, as it were, the primitive to the civilized. Yet one must hesitate to credit him immediately with a new anthropological vision here. With no acknowledgment, he has patently derived his picture of Homer in §879 from the third-century C.E. rhetorician Longinus’ renowned *On the Sublime*, Chapter 9, Sections 12-13:

12. It is clear from many indications that the *Odyssey* was his second subject. A special proof is the fact that he introduces in that poem remnants of the adventures before Ilium as episodes, so to say, of the Trojan War. And indeed, he there renders a tribute of mourning and lamentation to his heroes as though he were carrying out a long-cherished purpose. In fact, the *Odyssey* is simply an epilogue to the *Iliad*:—

There lieth Ajax the warrior wight, Achilles is there,
There is Patroclus, whose words had weight as a God he were;
There lieth mine own dear son. (*Odyssey* 3. 109-111 . . .)

13. It is for the same reason, I suppose, that he has made the whole structure of the *Iliad*, which was written at the height of his inspiration, full of action and conflict, while the *Odyssey* for the most part consists of narrative, as is characteristic of old age. Accordingly, in the *Odyssey* Homer may be likened to a sinking sun, whose grandeur remains without its intensity. He does not in

the *Odyssey* maintain so high a pitch as in those poems of Ilium. His sublimities are not evenly sustained and free from the liability to sink; there is not the same profusion of accumulated passions, nor the supple and oratorical style, packed with images drawn from real life. You seem to see henceforth the ebb and flow of greatness, and a fancy roving in the fabulous and incredible, as though the ocean were withdrawing into itself and was being laid bare within its own confines. (W. Rhys Roberts translation)

I believe there is a plausible way to exonerate Vico of being a plagiarist in §879.

One need only focus on what Vico seems to be trying to circumlocute that Longinus is, in contrast, promoting. Longinus' "Homer" is a long-since individualized writer whose powers are as subject to decline as any other author's. This emphasis may even have been the origin of Pope's admiration for Homer's prodigious selectivity in the matter of appropriating dialects for *ad hoc* metrical uses. On the other hand, Vico avoids "wrote" at the top of §879. Using "composed" instead allows our inference as Vico's readers that the individual epics are separate, orally produced (diachronic) repositories of character and cultural values. From this perspective, §879 takes a received *mūthos* about Homer and shapes it to fit the wider historical *télos* of his work.

The question is whether in §879 Vico is being bold, scholarly (via the paradoxical device of displaying *silenter* his knowledge of the *Greek* authority Longinus), or merely inconsistent? Does the phrase "he wrote the *Odyssey*" refer to a culmination, like Nagy's Period 5? After all, elsewhere he has presented

Homer as a peripatetic oral bard. Is “Homer composed” best charitably excused as merely a *lapsus calami*? As it turns out, if it is a “lapse,” it is pardonable, since it has yet another source in late antiquity to reinforce Longinus. The *circa* fourth-century C.E. corpus known as “Pseudo-Herodotus” is another source of the phrase “Homer wrote.” The story goes that Homer was originally a *kalós* (Aristotle’s word from the opening of the *Poetics* that is often accurately translated as “successful”) literary poet, but that owing to advancing eye-disease he was eventually reduced to poverty, reciting his poetry in the market-place. This *mūthos* almost comically reverses the usual one that moves from “the oral” to “the written.” Whether Vico actually knew pseudo-Herodotus is arguable given his supposedly faulty Greek; this probability is all the greater given that pseudo-Herodotus is (as one should expect of a writer once thought to *be* Herodotus) in Ionian rather than Attic. The important thing is that it was the source of Homeric lore which Vico obviously assimilated.

Nagy’s analysis of the Homeric evolution toward textuality—that is, from Period 2 to Period 3—provides a means for interpreting Vico’s ambivalence as a theoretical advance. In *Homeric Questions*, he writes:

It is only . . . after 550 B.C.E. or so, that we begin to see actual examples of the use of writing in the form of manuscripts. . . [S]ome of these examples involve the use of a manuscript for purposes of a transcript, that is, in order to record any given *composition* and to control the circumstances of any given *performance*. [his emphasis] (p. 65)

Nagy takes the stance that the *mūthos* of Homer as an oral poet does not *disappear* with the production of transcripts; neither is there an end to “(re-) composition-in-performance.” Rather, the production of texts by the Peisistratidai allows the State to control this *mūthos*. To create a metaphor from the terminology of linguistics, [compose, write] is a conceptual minimal pair that reflects the transition from Period 2 to Period 3. The idea of the Peisistratean recension as metaphoric appeals to Nagy:

[T]he very concept of a "Peisistratean recension" can be derived from such a metaphor. The intrinsic applicability of text as metaphor for recomposition-in-performance helps explain a type of *mūthos*, attested in a wide variety of cultural contexts, where the evolution of a poetic tradition, moving slowly ahead in time until it reaches a relatively static phase, is reinterpreted by the *mūthos* as if it resulted from a single incident, pictured as the instantaneous recovery or even regeneration of a lost text, an archetype. In other words, *mūthos* can make its own "big bang" theory for the origins of epic, and it can even feature in its scenario the concept of writing. (HQ)

Vico's ambiguity in §879 reflects a similar belief in “process.” Moreover, the entry is a conclusion drawn from, *inter alia*, this earlier cluster of remarks;

§854. The Pisistratids also ordered that from that time onward that poems should be sung by the rhapsodes at the Panathenaic festivals, as Cicero writes in his *On The Nature of The Gods* . . . [sic -- *On the Orator*] and Aelian also [*Various History* 8.2], who is followed on this point by [his editor, Johann] Scheffer.

§855. But the Pisistratids were expelled from Athens only a few

years earlier than the Tarquins were from Rome. So, if we assume that Homer lived as late as the time of Numa, a long period must still have ensued after the Pisistratids during which the rhapsodes continued to preserve his poems by memory. This tradition takes away all credit from the other [.] according to which it was at the time of the Pisistratids that Aristarchus purged, divided, and arranged the poems of Homer, for that could not have been done without vulgar [i.e., widely understood] writing, and so from then on there would have been no need of rhapsodes to sing the several parts of them from memory.

It is misleading to think of these references to the “Peisistratean recension” as central to Vico’s implementation of Homer in his historical paradigm; rather, they demonstrate once again his anxious desire to display the *range and depth* of his scholarship to his own putative, frustratingly distant, Continental audience. In light of this motive, it is almost sad that §855 exposes an error concerning the actual sequence of events: the Aristarchan redaction at Alexandria took place three centuries after the rule of the Peisistratidai. Yet the important thing to see about Vico’s ruminations here is that he is trying very hard to maintain a discrimination between the oral and the written. In so doing, he is stunningly ahead of the general “Ancients and Moderns” Homeric paradigm.

The underlined segments in §855 highlight two correspondences with modern theories. For one thing, Vico makes the *a priori* assumption that the invention of writing terminates the need for preservation based on memory, thus anticipating A.B. Lord’s empirically based generalization about performance in the South Slavic song-culture:

[W]hen writing is introduced and begins to be used for the same purposes as the oral narrative song, when it is employed for telling stories and is widespread enough to find an audience capable of reading, this audience seeks its entertainment and instruction in books rather than in the living songs of men, and the older art gradually disappears. (*Singer*, p. 20).

Vico also looks forward to the following observations about the Panathenaic rhapsode (Period) by Nagy:

The rhapsode Ion performs Homer not only on such major occasions as the competitions taking place at the festival of the Panathenaia. He also performs Homer on less formal occasions such as the convivial but competitive encounter dramatized in Plato's dialogue *Ion*, where we see the rhapsode being challenged by Socrates to perform a given selection from the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

The term "selection" is misleading, however. It implies a purely textual mentality—as if all that Ion had to do was to "quote" some passage that he had read and happened to have memorized. Even the word "quote" can mislead, since it could imply *the saying of words that have already been written*. In my own discussion, I continue to use "quote" only in a restricted sense, to mean *the saying of words that have already been spoken*. . . . I . . . stress that I mean no implications of textuality. In the art of the rhapsode, to "quote" is not to "take" something out of a text, out of context. The rhapsodic "taking" of words requires the mnemonics of continuity. What the rhapsode can do it is to *start anywhere* in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and, once started, *to keep going*. (*Plato's Rhapsody*, pp. 22-23)

Note that if we set Nagy's opinion here against Vico's at §855, we see that both of them postulate that performance through memory alone, without written aids, remained in practice at the Panathenaia. The problem in arguing for full Vichian visionary insight on this point is his blatantly jumbled chronology, which may also explain his use of the conditional ("if" / "then"). A major

consequence of this reluctance to let go of the “oral evolutionary model” at §879 is that he hereafter drops the problem of intrusion that a written record presents, and resumes speaking of Homer as a Panathenaic phenomenon. In a passage extending from §881 to §888, he sums things up:

§881-§888. [I]t was from the northeastern part of Greece that the Homer came who sang of the Trojan War, which took place in his country, and . . . it was from the southwestern part of Greece that the Homer came who sang of Ulysses, whose kingdom was in that region. . . . Thus Homer, lost in the crowd of Greek peoples, is justified against all the accusations leveled at him by the critics, and particularly [against those made] on account of his. . . base sentences,. . . vulgar customs,. . . crude comparisons,. . . local idioms,. . . licenses in meter,. . . variations in dialect.

Consider the sense of *déjà vu* one gets from comparing this passage with the linguistic summary in Pope’s “Preface.” The “critics” to whom Vico refers are pretty obviously those who faulted Homer in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries for lack of decorum, or “elevation.” As a received notion, this has a “writerly” quality that is contrary to Vico’s anthropological interests. To stress how crucial this matter of elevation was considered at the time to interpreting Homer, I resume my Vico-Pope comparison, turning once more to Steven Shankman.

As this scholar has detailed, the controversy over Pope’s translation of the *Iliad* focused in part concerned whether the poet was justified in gratuitously “smoothing” the very set of flaws Vico enumerates in the passage above.

Shankman presents the problem in terms of genre, as one of “oral and written styles.” He uses as background material the point Aristotle makes in the *Rhetoric* 3,12 about the function of repetition in oratory. First, Aristotle cites this example of what he calls “dramatic delivery,” from *Iliad*, Scroll 2:

Nileus from Syme [led the balanced vessels],
 Nileus son of Aglaia [and of the king Charopos],
 Nileus the most beautiful man [who came to Ilion.]

Shankman observes that Aristotle is using Homer here as an example of oratorical technique—in this case, asyndeton.¹¹ He quotes Aristotle’s explanation at length:

Now the style of oratory addressed to public assemblies is really just like *scene-painting* [My emphasis. Here Shankman silently substitutes “a rough sketch or outline.”] (σκιαγραφία). The bigger the throng, the more distant is the point of view: so that, in the one and the other, high finish in detail is superfluous and seems better away. The forensic style is more highly finished; still more so is the style of language addressed to a single judge, with whom there is very little room for rhetorical artifices, since he can take the whole thing in better, and judge of what is to the point and what is not; the struggle is less intense and so the judgement is undisturbed. This is why the same speakers do not distinguish themselves in all these branches at once; high finish is wanted least where dramatic delivery is wanted most, and here the speaker must have a good

¹¹ In the strictest sense, “asyndeton” is a grammatical omission, as in “Veni, vidi, vici,” through which the orator-as-persuader rather surreptitiously avoids scrutiny by hurrying through the issue at hand. This is the emblem of both Cæsar’s masterly Hemingwayesque prose and his political ambition in the *De bello gallico*. Note how Cæsar’s use of this device is incidentally vindicated by Aristotle’s concept of employing Homer as distant *auctoritas* to sway “general audiences” while skirting forensic accountability.

voice, and above all, a strong one. It is ceremonial oratory that is most literary, for it is meant to be read; and next to it forensic oratory. [W. Rhys Roberts translation]

As is evidenced by his translation of *skiagraphía* as “rough sketch,” Shankman interprets Aristotle as meaning that the difference between “oral” and “written” is a matter of, as it were, detail. This translation goes right along with Aristotle’s distinctions in the various purposes of the various forms of argument, with written forms applying to the closest reasoning. Yet there are two subtleties in this passage that “rough sketch” doesn’t bring out. The first is the incongruence with modern sensibilities of associating Homer with any affective purpose other than purely to induce *hēdōnē*, “pleasure” (though this was common in antiquity, as Plato’s criticisms of Homer used as a moral authority exemplify). The second is Aristotle’s premise that “scene-painting” (a *tekhnē* Aristotle enjoys comparing with tragedy and epic in the *Poetics*) is a matter of the speaker’s physical distance from the audience. Aristotle thus associates the gathering of crowds with memorized recitation¹² rather than the reading of “present” texts; furthermore, his model entails a progression from one to the other.

Vico distinguishes Homer from Hesiod in remarkably similar terms. In a lengthy passage, he endeavors to account for the difference between oral and

¹² In Aristotle’s context, one must think in terms of a *rhētor* instead of a *rhapsoidós*.

literary epic:

§856. By this reasoning [i.e., that the invention of writing made the rhapsodes obsolete], Hesiod, who left his works in writing, would have to be placed after the Pisistratids, since we have no authority for supposing that he was preserved by the memory of the rhapsodes as Homer was, though the vain diligence of the chronologists has placed him thirty years before Homer. Like the Homeric rhapsodes, however, were the cyclic poets, who preserved all the fabulous history Greece from the origins of their gods down to the return of Ulysses to Ithaca. These cyclic poets, so called from *kyklos*, circle, could have been no other than simple men who would sing the fables to the common people gathered in a circle around them on festive days. This circle is precisely the one alluded to by Horace in his *Art of Poetry* in the phrase *vilem patulumque orbem*, "the base and large circle," concerning which Dacier is not at all satisfied with the commentators who assert that Horace here means long episodes or digressions. And perhaps the reason for this dissatisfaction is this: that it is not necessary that an episode in a plot be base simply because it is long. . . . [I]n our present passage Horace, having advised the tragic poets to take their arguments from the poems of Homer, runs into the difficulty that in that case they would not be poets [in the sense of creators], since their plots would be those invented by Homer. So Horace answers them that the epic stories of Homer will become tragic plots of their own if they will bear three things in mind. The first is to refrain from making idle paraphrases, in the way we still see men read the *Orlando furioso* or the [*Orlando*] *innamorato* or some other rhymed romance to the "base and large circles" of idle people on feast days, and, after reciting each stanza, explain it to them in prose with more words. The second is **not** to be faithful translators. The third and last is not to be servile imitators, but, adhering to the characters that Homer attributes to his heroes, to bring forth from them new sentiments, speeches, and actions in conformity with them; thus on the same subjects they will be new poets in the style of Homer. So, in the same passage, Horace speaks of a "cyclical poet" as a trivial marketplace poet. Authors of this sort are ordinarily called *kyklia epe*, *enkyklioi*, and sometimes *kyklos* without qualification, as Gerard Langhaine observes in his preface to Dionysius Longinus. [Here is evidence that Vico was not entirely "Greekless"! So in this way it

may be that Hesiod, who contains the fables of all the gods, is earlier than Homer.

This long, detailed entry is of note for two reasons. First, the mention of Dacier supports my interpretation of the *Scienza Nuova* that it represents as much of a contribution to the Quarrel as an attempt to break from it. Far more compelling is that this paragraph exhibits, perhaps more vividly than in any other in the *Scienza Nuova*, Vico's entrapment by the oral-versus-written dilemma. To illustrate this, I begin by quoting from Andrea Battistini's note to §856 in his edition of Vico's *Opere*:

Non è da escludere che proprio le tecniche degli improvvisatori, tanto diffusi nel Settecento, abbiano suggerito a Vico, sempre disponibile ad impiegare il metodo comparatistico, alcuni spunti interpretativi della poesia d'Omero.¹³

(One cannot at all exclude the possibility that the techniques of the *improvvisatori*, who were so diffuse in the Settecento, had suggested Homer's poetry to Vico, who was always disposed to using the comparative method as an interpretive starting point.

The sources of Battistini's conjecture here consist of literature produced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the Neapolitan *cantastorie*, a social niche quite felicitously translated as "singer of tales," which in turn obviously brings to mind the fieldwork of Albert B. Lord. And there are several

¹³ *Opere* (Mondadori, 1990), vol. 2, p. 1701 (commenting *Scienza Nuova*, libro III, sez. I, cap. VI, xvii [856]).

notable semantic resonances between Battistini's characterizations and key concepts I have been discussing. To begin with, there is his word "tecniche," "techniques," which as a manifest cognate, corresponds etymologically with the idea that the archetype (*carattere*) of the oral poet, the *oidós* > *rhapsôidós*, has received a *tekhnē* as part of a pan-cultural heritage. Accordingly, Battistini observes that these *cantastorie* were "diffusi." I emphasize that in describing an oral poetic model, this word carries some ambiguity. In Battistini's context, the *cantastorie* were "diffuse" in the sense of "numerous," rather than in the sense both Nagy (and, properly speaking, Vico himself) mean of representing a pan-cultural tradition. (I cite again Vico's detail at §878 that "Omero" was actually a "class" of *rapsòdi* who made a meager living wandering "per le città della Grecia"—"throughout the cities of Greece,") I think Battistini is leaving it to be understood that the "Rinaldi singers" were by and large a phenomenon confined to Naples. Such provinciality is an essential part of what Croce is trying to convey when he himself explicates §856 indirectly:

[T]he cyclic poets were not so called because of the circle of listeners in the centre of which they declaimed their poems, like the "Rinaldi" or ballad-singers whom Vico saw on the quay at Naples, and this circle had no connexion with the *uilem patulumque* of Horace; but the observation that they differed little from these ballad-singers was sound. (*Philosophy*, p. 192)

Croce's analysis has a paradoxical element. He emphasizes that Vico's citation of Horace merely points to a merely analogical connection between the *uilem*

patulumque and the Rinaldi singers. Yet the “observation that they differed little” surely makes them more than analogous. Whatever the implications of Croce’s interpretation, the subtlety of the comparison Battistini posits between the *cantastorie* and Homer is that the former originated in the Settecento. What he omits is that the very term “Rinaldi” (more properly, in my opinion, “Rinaldo”) refers to a character in a *written* epic, *Orlando Furioso*. Hence, ironically enough, the “Rinaldo” phenomenon moves in the opposite direction from that of the first stages of Nagy’s oral-evolutionary model: in §856, as elsewhere in Book III, Vico transfers his putative empirical template for “Homer” from “the written” back to “the oral.” This movement anticipates his “cloning” of the literary Homer to create a plausible set of multiple errant *rapsòdi* in §877-§878.

It would be a misrepresentation to leave matters at that. For the simultaneous alternate way to interpret §856 is as yet another example of Vico’s dependence on Classical sources. Vico’s use of authority here could be seen uncharitably here as somewhat misguided. Particularly egregious are: (1) his confident assertion that Hesiod may have come before Homer; (2) his need to accommodate somehow in his paradigm the facticity of the “Peisistratean recension” (authority for which he elsewhere states he has found in Cicero’s *De natura deorum*) and (3) his conveniently truncated quotation of lines 131-132 of Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, which is actually “si / non circa uilem patulumque

moraberis orbem." This last Vichian "error" merits special attention. Horace is really saying something like "if you [the poet] are not to feel yourself completely circumscribed (i.e., "hampered") by the hackneyed bounds of the canon."

(Compare William Blake's declaration "I must create my own System or be enslav'd by another Mans.") Vico's misprision of Horace may be a matter of simple carelessness; but there is another more generous—and far more intriguing—possibility, which Croce's scholium on this mistake indirectly suggests. A "Professor of Latin Eloquence" would hardly be likely to mistranslate Horace through incompetence. I suspect that what he is actually attempting is something of which Kierkegaard would doubtless have approved. He has subjectively *re-appropriated* Horace's "set," if you will, {*uilem patulumque*, "common bounds of the canon"} by taking advantage of the polysemous semantics that Latin's relative lexical poverty makes possible, which fully accommodates in the context of §856 another "set" appropriate to his basic model for the oral poet: {*uilem patulumque*, "rustic circle of auditors"}. At the same time, he has remained consistent in his reliance on Greek and Latin authority. In Blakean terms, Vico has indeed "created a system" that posits a pre-literate culture of "poetic wisdom" as a precursor to philosophy, and which thus leads to modern European cultural forms. Moreover, he avoids what he consistently perceives to be the fundamental flaw in "Descartes' criterion of self-evidence," to hearken back to

Croce's insight. Vico does this by encouraging his readers, *through* his misprision of Horace, to accept the "Rinaldi" reference as historical proof that his model is empirically sound.

The obvious problem with this interpretation is that, as Croce's qualified negatives may signal, the *Scienza Nuova* never makes explicit reference to the "Rinaldi" singers. Thus they have a status within Vico's grand argument that is similar to that of the Trinity: they are "present" though "absent." Yet there is evidence that Vico *wants* his audience to infer a real Homeric *carattere*, which would vindicate Croce's assertion that Vico connects (in his unexpressed thought processes, at least) Homer, Horace, and the Rinaldi singers. At the University of Naples there exists an 1819 collection of Vico's miscellaneous writings containing a commentary on the *Ars Poetica*. His note on line 131, "si nec circa uilem patulumque moraberis orbem" contains the following observation:

Questo passo di Orazio tormenta tutti i commentatori, ma il suo vero senso è questo: "se non fai la parafrasi di Omero," come quelli che leggono e spiegano a larghi cerchi di ascoltatori volgari. (My emphasis)

This passage from Horace torments all the commentators, but its true sense is this: "if you do not paraphrase Homer," like those who interpret and explain at long remove from the [original illiterate] pagan [volgari] audiences. (My translation)

Vico uses the much same critical vocabulary to describe the evolutionary aftermath of oral poesis that I have striven thus far to associate with Pope's and

Swift's understandings of Homer's misguided, "misprising" interpreters: "commentatori"; "leggono e spiegano." Vico's word "parafrasi," which he has essentially interpolated, reminds one of the tendency Albert Lord noted for writing to curtail creativity and thus the evolutionary process among the guslars, Vico is being thoroughly consistent with the elements of the Quarrel and with himself as he would later argue in the *Scienza Nuova* when he ends his observation at the beginning of the oral-evolutionary model by putting a picture in our minds of the "ascoltatori volgari."

Concerning this oral model framed on the ballad concept, Anthony Grafton has seen fit to quote, of all sources, Richard Bentley, from the very same letter cited above in connection with Pope. Grafton comments:

Richard Bentley, the most proficient Hellenist and editor of Classical texts in early eighteenth-century Europe, dismissed the idea that Homer had meant to instruct and entertain readers for ages to come: "Take my word for it, poor *Homer* in those circumstances and early times had never such aspiring thoughts. He *wrote* [my emphasis] a sequel of Songs and Rhapsodies, to be sung by himself for small earnings and good cheer, at Festivals and other days of Merriment: the *Ilias* he made for the Men, and the *Odyssis* for the other sex." [*Remarks upon a Discourse of Free-Thinking in a Letter to F.H.D.D.* (pp. 25-6)] (Introduction, p. xxiv)

The context Bentley's portrait of Homer creates here virtually replicates Vico's language at §856: "simple men who would sing the fables to the common people gathered in a circle around them on festive days." When we consider that this same man criticized Pope for his incompetency to render the Greek accurately,

we have a *semēion* for why Bentley is a pivotal figure in the evolution of Homer theories. For here is a man with relatively strong credentials *vis-à-vis* “text” who nonetheless envisions an original scenario in which there were multiple oral “rhapsodes.”

From our viewpoint, the (implicit!) connection Vico makes in §856 between Homer/Hesiod and the “Rinaldi” singers is not very “scientific”; once again, it relies too heavily on ancient authority and an appeal to similitude. Yet it has one feature that makes it “modern”: Vico differentiates Homer from Hesiod as an artist of memory rather than literacy. I submit that this picture anticipates Periods 1 and 2 of Nagy’s model. Let me hasten to qualify this assertion, however, by stating that Vico does not *replicate* Nagy’s position. In *Pindar’s Homer*, Nagy writes:

I [have] argued that the rhapsodes were direct heirs to earlier traditions in oral poetry. But we see that over a long period their role has become differentiated from that of the oral poet. Whereas the oral poet recomposes as he performs, the rhapsode simply performs. . . . [In the rhapsodic phase,] variation is counteracted by the ideology of fixity. To that extent we see at least the impetus toward the notion of textual fixation without writing.

Nagy’s interest is in establishing a clear demarcation between phases of “(re-)composition” and of oral “fixity” prior to the introduction of transcripts. In §856, by contrast, Vico is keen to compare “rhapsodic” poetry with other generic forms on the basis of cultural function.

On the surface, Vico's reputedly mediocre knowledge of Greek puts him in an analogous predicament with his critics to the one Pope was in with Bentley. But if we construe a seventeenth-century Neopolitan understanding of the word *filologi* as something like "etymological historians," Vico becomes a visionary who sees past Homer as "text." Joseph Levine frames the matter as thus:

Were the philologists to be allowed to subordinate original texts beneath a mountain of critical commentary and controversial remarks, marginalia, footnotes, appendices, and indexes? And were they—worse yet, with their external corrections and emendations—to be left alone to undermine the authority and perfection of the ancient authors? ("Battle," p. 77)

Vico the aspiring denizen of cultural history sees Homer the assiduously "evaluated" text as an obstacle to grasping his far greater cultural significance. Thus his instrumentation of Homer in his general theories supports Leon Pompa's view that Vico conceived "Homer" as providing an invaluable record of "communal modes of thought." In reflection, we are also struck at how closely Levine's formulation here mimes—unintentionally, we suppose—the language of Swift's satire with the phrase "a mountain of critical commentary and controversial remarks, marginalia, footnotes, appendices, and indexes," hence working still further backward toward its origin in Pope's "Preface."

Gathering together the threads of my argument, I propose that in §856, §879, and §881-§888 Vico makes an extraordinary progression from a

permutation of (pseudo-) Longinus to a harbinger of modern theories regarding the separate origins of the two epics. In so doing, he both engages the old Quarrel and presents a picture of a “Homer” or class of “Homers” who composed orally in performance.

There are two further points which emerge from this duality. Vico’s Homer is ultimately quite similar to Pope’s, especially as delineated in his Preface to the *Iliad*. A second point could be construed as diametrically opposed to the first. That is, the *Discoverta* as it unfolds in Book III could almost be considered a set of notes for a contemporary summary of theories about Homer.

A case in point is this passage from the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

There is some agreement to date the poems in the second half of the 8th cent. B.C., This was the age of colonization and Greek world. . . , [A]nd it may be no accident that the *Iliad* shows an interest in the north-east, towards the Black (Euxine) Sea, while much of the *Odyssey* looks toward the west. In *Od.* 6. 7-10 many have seen an echo of the founding of a Greek colony. As to Homer himself, the *Iliad* at least suggests a home on the east side of the Aegean Sea, for storm winds in a simile blow over the sea from Thrace, from the north and west (9.5), and the poets seems familiar with the area near Miletus (2. 461) as well as that near Troy (12. 10-35). Moreover, the predominantly Ionic flavour of the mixed dialect of the poems suits the cities of the Ionian migration on the other side of the Aegean. Chios and Smyrna The strongest claims to have been his birthplace. (p. 718)

If we strip away from this *OCD* summary the linguistic, archeological, and geographical data that we have acquired since Vico, we are left with a general

understanding that is arrestingly similar to the one Vico expresses in the *Scienza Nuova* about the differences between the epics. Both accounts say that the *Iliad* is older; both note that while the *Iliad* reflects cultural agitation, the *Odyssey* is about the process of civilization. It could be argued against my comparison here that Vico's observations are self-evident. I counter that they are more than that; Vico links the difference with the contrasting character (*carattere*) traits of Achilles and Odysseus. Vico and the *OCD* both compress the oral Homeric poetic tradition into one literate representative. We can only assume that the author of the *OCD* article does this because of space limitations. The counter-evidence is that the *OCD* also refers to continued controversy over "Homer's" geographical origin as if this is still considered a *bona fide* issue (e.g., "As to Homer himself, the *Iliad* at least suggests a home on the east side of the Aegean Sea, for storm winds in a simile blow over the sea from Thrace, from the north and west (9.5), and the poets seems familiar with the area near Miletus (2. 461) as well as that near Troy (12. 10-35).") From an ontological viewpoint, the best way to interpret the *OCD*'s contemporary example of a more or less syncopated set of literary "Homers" is to admit the "oral versus written" dilemma has yet to be resolved. This makes Vico's description of "Homer" in §877-§878 seem uncannily "authoritative." The irony is that, ultimately, Vico's *auctoritas* on this issue comes not from fledgling archaeology, etymology, or even the comparative

empirical model of the *cantastorie*, but from the Classical corpus:

§853. The Pisistratids, tyrants of Athens, divided and arranged the poems of Homer, or had them divided and arranged, into [two groups,] the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Hence we may understand what a confused mass of material [cf. "*libros confusos*"] they must have been before, when the difference we can observe between the styles of the two poems is infinite.

§854. The Pisistratids also ordered that from that time on the poems should be sung by the rhapsodes at the Panathenaic festivals, as Cicero writes in his *On the Nature of the Gods* [*De natura deorum*], and Aelian also

In sum, the biographer/historian Plutarch, in his *Life of Lycurgus*, echoed Cicero's "scattered about," and that the intuitive textual scholar Bentley observed that the Homeric poems were not "gathered together" until the Peisistratean recension. Vico's own intuitive understanding that the Rinaldi singers and the Classical corpus are combined evidence for the *verum/factum* of a Homeric "tradition" represents a true advancement from those iterative positions. Vico's "new" perspective was "made possible" by a combination of his stronger *fantasia* and weaker scholarship. Yet ironically, his defiantly anti-Cartesian reliance on history and literature as represented by the Classical corpus in a sense make him more "ancient" than "modern," more of a "scripsist" than an "oralist" in his orientation.

6. VICO'S HOMERIC *ÉKPHRASIS*

What, exactly, is Vico hoping to accomplish by interpolating his perspective on the Homeric Question into his overall historical argument in the *Scienza Nuova*? At first blush the subject of Homer does not fit that naturally within his greater forensic framework (cf. Aristotle's ideal as he expresses it in the opening of the *Poetics*, 1447a10: *legômen . . . kata fusin*, which I translate as "let us discourse . . . in accordance with nature"). That this component does not appear until Book III, *after* he has put forward other major parts of his theory, almost surprises the reader; it seems like an anomaly, in spite of references to Homer Vico makes in the preliminary "Principles" section. In Books I and II, he has already established a *Weltanschauung* predicated on certain ideas that do not depend at all on "reevaluating" Homer *per se*. To explore this problem, I now consider the *Scienza nuova's* ecphrastic "trigger," to invoke Penelope Wilson's word again.

The answer is bundled up within Vico's "improvements" to his *ur-text*, so to speak. The recension history of the *New Science* is very complex, but it is important to delve into it a bit as a means of understanding why Homer is there in the first place. When I first read the work, Book III seemed almost like an afterthought. This impression was reinforced by language Vico uses in "Idea of

the Work.” As it turns out, however, Homer played a key role in Vico’s evolving paradigm from the beginning. Donald Phillip Verene starts us off in 1717:

To show qualification for . . . [the vacant chair in civil law at the University of Naples,] Vico conceived of a multi-part work on universal law. . . . Although written in Latin, Vico called this multi-part work by the Italian title *Il diritto universale*. . . . [In the last part] there is a chapter entitled ‘Nova scientia tentatur’ (‘A new science is essayed’) in which, Vico says, he began to reduce philology to scientific principles . . . It is Vico’s first sketch of his idea of a ‘new science.’¹⁴

Vico did not get the position; nonetheless, the proto-form of the *Scienza Nuova* persisted. Verene comments:

When Vico had finished and sent off for review [to Jean le Clerc] the copies of the first two books, he proceeded to write a third book, which, among other things, applied the principles of philology and mythology he had formulated to in the first two books to a reading of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. He published this in 1722 as *Notae in duos libros*, appended to the first two books of his theory of universal law. A copy of this was also sent to le Clerc, but Vico received no reply. This appendix (*Dissertationes*) is a precursor to Vico’s ‘search for the true Homer’ in the *New Science*. (p. 19)

Homer remained integral when Vico altered the thrust of his system to de-emphasize law and refocus on European cultural history. He commissioned an engraving for the *dipintura* of the 1725 edition which he hoped would establish the scope of his argument before he elaborated it. As a precedent, he cited an

¹⁴ *The New Art of Autobiography: An Essay on the Life of Giambattista Vico Written by Himself* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 18.

ancient text:

§1. As Cebes the Theban made a table of moral institutions, we offer here one of civil institutions. We hope it may serve to give the reader some conception of the work before he reads it, and, with such aid as imagination may afford, to call it back to mind after he has read it.

Superficially, Vico is establishing that his work will set out a carefully rationalistic form the history of, in his parlance, “gentile” social practices. Here he is engaging in *double entente*, since “table” (*tavola*) can also be translated by the French cognate *tableau*, in the sense of “picture.” Giuseppe Mazzotta has noted that, as innovative as the device may seem, it has substantial precedents:

The centrality of Homer to his science was unequivocally foreshadowed by the allegorical emblem featured on the frontispiece. The emblem, which is a figurative technique even in philosophical texts (see Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, Bacon’s *Instauratio Magna* and *Sylva Sylvarum*, Alciati’s *Emblemata*, etc.) presents a visual resumé of the themes which are at the fulcrum of the *New Science*. (*New Map*, p. 143)

To interpret the iconography justly, one should supplement Mazzotta’s reference to Vico’s awareness of the emblematic “convention” with the observation that the frontispiece and its accompanying explanation represent Vico’s effort to show that he was familiar with the new instruments archeology and textual criticism (philology) that were revolutionizing Classical scholarship. Joseph Levine comments,

While the French moderns were upbraiding Homer for his faults, scholars throughout Europe were studying the historical and critical

problems that still obscured the text. Who in fact was Homer? When had the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* been written and the Trojan war been fought? How reliable were the manuscripts, and what was the meaning of their more obscure passages? Little by little philologists increase their learning, delved into language and customs of early Greece, collated the texts and tried to fathom their meaning. Whole treatises were written to treat the finer points the poems were edited and reedited and the commentary grew steadily more voluminous. Meanwhile, antiquaries added their efforts. Asia Minor was too remote to investigate directly, but a number of monuments came to light and were examined minutely: a bust and a sculptured apotheosis of Homer, as well as some early medals and inscriptions. (1999, p. 79)

The frontispiece represents more than an attempt to link it with late Renaissance philosophy. Vico also has created a propaedeutic vehicle from which he can perform an *ékphrasis*—i.e., an etiological narrative of an *ad hoc* yet nominally familiar set of icons. The obvious *fons et origo* of this device is Homer's own *ékphrasis*: that of Achilles' Shield in the *Iliad*, Scroll 18 at lines 410-617. But one must not stop here, for, true to his habitual simultaneous dependence on the modes of antiquity and involvement in the Quarrel, his referential strategy places Vico in the mainstream that began with late Renaissance esthetics, and serves as a springboard for his goal of developing a "*scienza Nuova*." Homer's own central importance in this *ékphrasis* is plain. Vico states:

§6. The same ray [that is, the all-illuminating ray of Providence] is reflected from the breast of metaphysic onto the statue of Homer, the first pagan [*gentile*] author who has come down to us. For

metaphysic, which has been formed from the beginning according to a history of human ideas from the commencing of truly human thinking among the pagans [*gentili*], has enabled us finally to descend into the crude minds of the first founders of the pagan nations, all robust sense and vast imagination [*fantasia*]. They had only the bare potentiality, and that torpid and stupid, of using the human mind and reason. From that very cause the beginnings of poetry, not only different from but contrary to those which have been hitherto imagined, are found to lie in the beginnings of poetic wisdom, which have from that same cause been hitherto hidden from us. This poetic wisdom, the knowledge of the theological poets, was unquestionably the first wisdom of the world for the pagans.

Vico minces no words about his low opinion of Homer's heroes. That he was in this particular a child of the same *epistēmē* as Pope is brought home by the criticism made commonly in Pope's own day that his *Iliad* translation was too polished. At all events, the progression Vico is trying to make from the "torpid and stupid" Homeric characters to the "theological poets" is, by contrast, quite obscure at this point.

Possibly the most meaningful (and, to my mind, the funniest) detail in the engraving is the cracked base, which Vico explains thus:

§6. . . . The statue of Homer on a cracked base signifies that the discovery [*discoverta*, here clearly indicating a revelation] of the true Homer. (In the first edition of the *New Science*. . . we sensed it but did not understand it. In the present edition it is fully set forth after due consideration. . .) Unknown until now, he has held hidden from us the true institutions of the fabulous time among the nations, and much more so those out of the dark time which all had despaired of knowing, [cf. Pope's characterization of Homeric language, "if there be sometimes a *Darkness*"] and consequently the first true origins of the institutions of the historic time. (*ibid.*)

In this little narrative, Vico at one stroke hits upon both the linguistic and the “found object” aspects of the Homeric Question. He makes Homer integral to the “evolutionary model” which serves as the foundation for his theory of history. The connection is sealed at the section’s end when Vico drops a clue to his ulterior purpose, introducing the “three ages” through which his arguments eventually became so thoroughly cannibalized by more than a few *literati* not known for their philosophical acumen, e.g. Hugo and Joyce:

§6. . . These are the three times of the world which Marcus Terentius Varro, the most learned writer on Roman antiquities, recorded for us in his great work entitled [*The Antiquities*] of *Divine and Human Institutions* . . . , which has been lost. (*ibid.* pp. 5-6)

Even now, Vico does not wish to stray far from firmly established modes of explication, as his Varro reference reflects. Until recently, I have accepted the impression left upon me as I have surveyed Vichian scholarship that this *ékphrasis* represented a thoroughly original stroke of genius in which Vico seized upon a worn device and applied it to a purpose that was wholly unique at the time. The particular detail that reinforced this conception for me was the cracked base of Homer’s statue in the aforementioned engraving, which I had been interpreting as Vico’s *sēma* indicating that the general view of who Homer was had hitherto been defective. Then I encountered this comment by Joseph Levine:

[Madame Anne Lefèvre Dacier (1651?-1720)] turned to the

archeological evidence that proclaimed Homer's reputation in antiquity: some ancient medals, a *tabula iliaca* recently described by Raffaele Fabretti, . . . and most important, the *Apotheosis of Homer*, a marble relief discovered in the seventeenth century, now in the British Museum. She was especially pleased with the latter. . . , which she had engraved as an illustration, though she left off Zeus and the muses. On the whole she was content to follow the recent explication of the figures by Gisbertus Cuperus, a Dutchman who had identified most of the figures, except that she questioned his reading of the too little animals at the base of Homer's Throne, which Cuperus thought must be the mice of the *Batrachomyomachia*. . . . Madame Dacier preferred to believe that they were really two rats gnawing away at Homer's reputation: "those vile Authors, who must not be able to attain any Reputation themselves, have endeavor'd to revenge that Contempt upon such Works as are in greatest Esteem, and who, whilst Time and the Whole Earth are crowning Homer, have made it their Business to cry him down (*Iliad*, 1.29) [Quoted from *L'Iliade d'Homère traduite en français, avec des remarques* (Paris, 1711), trans. John Ozell, *The Iliad of Homer*, 5 vols. (London, 1712)]. Madame Dacier did not like to mince words; her life of Homer concluded with several more pages of invective against those who had presumed to challenge the verdict of the ages. . . . (p. ??)

Two thoughts come immediately to mind. The first is that the impetus of this comment was an archeological find. Such representations were only now becoming available; further "concretization" of Homer that occurred with the discoveries of, e.g., Robert Wood and Heinrich Schliemann, would cause the focus of the Homeric Question to shift from whether Homer was superior to the Moderns to issues of facticity. As it was, these new ecphrastic *mimēsēs* were widely put to use as historical proof. Levine writes in a footnote concerning the Fabretti *tabula iliaca*: "[Such bas-reliefs] were pictorial representations of the

Trojan War probably devised in antiquity for the use of schoolboys.” (“Battle,” p. 86) Such connection between illustration and the education of youth is especially relevant to understanding Vico, given his great passion for maintaining high standards in teaching.

The rhetorical similarity between Dacier’s gnawing rats and Vico’s cracked base is too glaring to ignore. Yet Vico’s disinterest in making much formal discursive reference to “the Quarrel” *per se* creates the impression that he sees himself as moving beyond it. It is not, I think, unfair to conclude that the frontispiece to *Scienza Nuova* is ultimately derivative rather than innovative.

Still referring to his frontispiece, Vico gets around to what I contend is one of his most momentous assertions about Homer:

§23. The table [“tablet” is better] shows only the first letters of the alphabets and lies facing the statue of Homer. For the letters, as Greek tradition tells us of Greek letters, were not all invented at one time; at least they cannot all have been invented by Homer’s time, for we know that the left none of his poems in writing.

I believe that this fragment of Vico’s *ékphrasis* is a key passage for understanding the complexities of his concept of Homer as they relate to his larger historical perspective. To start with, his anxiety concerning his Continental reputation determines the flow of his rhetoric. Thus he demonstrates right away that he knows the Kadmos *mūthos* and its relation to the development of Greek

literacy.¹⁵ We are struck, however, by his subsequent abandonment of the alphabetic issue. His real purpose in this entry seems to be to emphasize that the need for an alphabet developed only gradually. In the engraving there are few letters because they do not apply to an oral poet; after all, “Homer left none of his poems in writing.” I feel Vico is referring in §23 to two Homeric “states-of-affairs,” one corresponding to Nagy’s Periods 1 and 2, and the other a transition in the direction of Period 3. This passage is strong evidence that Vico’s occasional “Homer wrote” is best interpreted as more than a *lapsus calami*. Rather, I argue, it reflects his belief in an *evolution* of “Homer” from a social functionary in “the obscure period which all had despaired of knowing” (§6) to a context corresponding (temporally, that is) with Nagy’s Periods 1 and 2, to an indispensable historical resource with the cohesion and *auctoritas* “Homer” enjoyed in Periods 4-5, and in post-Classical Europe.

Here a slight qualification will allow me to bring things together. At the very same time as §23 supports the idea that Vico possessed an intuitive general grasp of the mechanics of oral-evolutionary epic transmission, it also exposes how covertly dependent he is on “evidence” from the Classical corpus. I quote

¹⁵ Vico possibly refers here to this account in Herodotus:

[O]riginally they [i.e., the Greeks] shaped their letters exactly like all the other Phoenicians, but afterwards, *in the course of time*, they changed *by degrees* their language [my emphasis], and together with it the form likewise of their characters. *Histories*, 5:58

from the opening of the polemical *Against Apion* by the First Century CE Roman Josephus, who, like the Roman Plutarch, wrote in Greek:

1.2.2. It was ... late, and with difficulty, that they [= the Greeks] came to know the letters they now use; for those who would advance their use of these letters to the greatest antiquity pretend that they learned them from the Phoenicians and from Cadmus; yet is nobody able to demonstrate that they have any writing preserved from that time, neither in their temples, nor in any other public monuments. This appears, because the time when those lived who went to the Trojan war, so many years afterward, is in great doubt, and great inquiry is made, whether the Greeks used their letters at that time; and the most prevailing opinion, and that nearest the truth, is, that their present way of using those letters was unknown at that time. However, there is not any writing which the Greeks agree to be genuine among them ancients than Homer's Poems, who must plainly be confessed later than the siege of Troy; nay, the report goes, that even he did not leave his poems in writing, but that their memory was preserved in songs, and they were put together afterward, and that this is the reason of such a number of variations as are found in them. (William Whiston translation)

I say “polemical” because the *aitia*—the rhetorical “cause”—of this piece is that Josephus is answering the Egyptian Apion by making the case that Jewish culture is older than Hellenic culture as a component of his larger argument that Jewish culture is not inferior to Egyptian culture. And in Book II, Vico acknowledges that his own source for Homer’s original illiteracy was the Hebrew *historian* Josephus:

§429. But the difficulty as to the manner of their origin was created by the scholars themselves, all of whom regarded the origin of letters as a separate question from that of the origin of languages, whereas the two were by nature conjoined. And they should have

made out as much from the words for grammar and for characters. From the former, because grammar is defined as the art of speaking, yet grammata are letters, so that grammar should have been defined as the art of writing. So, indeed, it was defined by Aristotle, and so in fact it originally was; for, as will here be shown, all nations began to speak by writing, since all were originally mute. The word character, on the other hand, means idea, form, model, and certainly poetic characters came before those of articulate sounds. Josephus stoutly maintains, against the Greek grammarian Apion, that at the time of Homer the so-called vulgar letters had not yet been invented. Moreover, if these letters had been forms representing articulated sounds instead of being arbitrary signs, they would have been uniform among all nations, as the articulated sounds themselves are. But, giving up hope of knowing how languages and letters began, scholars have failed to learn that the first nations thought in poetic characters, spoke in fables, and wrote in hieroglyphics. These should have been the principles, which must by their nature be most certain, of philosophy in its study of human ideas and of philology in its study of human words.

Vico's citation of Josephus (not to mention Aristotle) shows his typical confidence in *auctoritas*. One can take the analytical perspective that in outline Josephus' version of history is commendably accurate. It is true, for example, that scholars have scant concrete evidence that the Kadmos *mūthos* (etiological narrative) refers to an actual Hellenic adaptation of a Phoenician (i.e., Semitic) sign-system, despite the high probability that this *mūthos* "compresses" a very early systemic contact between the Phoenicians and the Hellenes. Note, as well, that modern knowledge supports Josephus' assertion that the first Hellenic sign-system was not an alphabet but a Mycenaean *syllabary*, and is found on clay tablets (cf. Vico's "*tavola*" at §1, cited above) preserved by conflagration rather

than on “temples or monuments.” It is also true that the first remaining extended examples of the use of the Greek alphabet are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; this seems to be the basis of Barry F. Powell’s hypothesis that some “Adapter” created the Greek alphabet, on the spot, alone, *expressly* to record the Homeric poems.

The ultimate Vichian “modernity” of Josephus’ analysis is yet more evidence that mitigates any impression that no palpable or durable consciousness of an evolutionary cultural flow from “the oral” to “the written” exists in antiquity. Since my concomitant purpose is to demonstrate that just such a consciousness also survived during the Quarrel as an inheritance from antiquity, I now feel justified in coming back to Vico by observing that one core idea from Josephus that happens to be highly congenial to one of Vico’s own core understandings in the *Scienza Nuova* is that in the flux of history the Hebrews are superior to the vagaries of *gentile* European culture *ab initio*. This affinity in turn explains why Vico at §23 sounds almost exactly like Josephus at 2.2.1. Specifically, I am saying (to repeat for emphasis) that when Vico says

for the letters, as Greek tradition tells us of Greek letters, were not all invented at one time; at least they cannot all have been invented by Homer’s time, for we know that he left none of his poems in writing.]

he is reenacting (in Nagy’s Aristotelian understanding of *mīmēsis*) Josephus’

there is not any writing which the Greeks agree to be genuine

among them ancients than Homer's Poems, who must plainly be confessed later than the siege of Troy; nay, the report goes, that even he did not leave his poems in writing, but that their memory was preserved in songs.

Collectively, the texts from antiquity that Vico incorporates into his Book III *Discoverta*, represent a *muliggjørelse*, a “making possible” of the Homeric *mūthos* that resembles the one operating within the relationship between Lucian’s *carattere* of Homer and Vico’s proto-“oral-evolutionary” Homer as described in §877-§878. In both cases, the “singing Homers” must be “unearthed” from beneath mounds of textuality and *auctoritas*. At the same time, the question they both beg remains: if Vico’s main source is the Classical corpus, how “real” is the anticipation of current Homeric paradigms for which we now credit him?

7. VICO IMPLEMENTS A GRECO-ROMAN CONTINUUM

If Vico's program in the *Scienza Nuova* entails using iconography to divert pan-European discourse away from the Quarrel in order to proceed toward establishing an anti-Cartesian empirical model, what is the immediate target of his resulting new "ray"? Giuseppe Mazzotta gives this answer:

"La scoperta del vero Omero" unfolds by telling about a deliberate reversal of the most traditional and authoritative meditations on Homer's poetry. The polemical target for Vico. . . is Plato, whose uses of Homer are directly confronted. To discover the true Homer. . . means for Vico to establish the principle that "the wisdom of Homer was not at all different in kind" (NS/780) from the early poet-theologians of archaic Greece. This principle. . . counters Plato's opinion articulated in the *Republic*: "yet, as Plato left firmly fixed the opinion that Homer was endowed with sublime esoteric wisdom (and all the other philosophers have followed in his train, with [pseudo-] Plutarch foremost, writing an entire book on the matter) we shall here particularly examine if Homer was ever a philosopher. On this question another complete book was written

by Dionysius Longinus, which is mentioned by Dionysius Laertius in his *Life of Pyrrho* [i.e., by Suidas in the article on Longinus]” (NS/780). (p. 142)

I must disagree with Mazzotta if he means that the *ulterior* referent of Book III is Plato. I think it is actually Homer as people had commonly conceived “him”: a shadowy personage who, Vico believes, had always been misprised as a philosophical ancestor of Plato. In support of this view I quote *all* the first part of §780: “Although our demonstration in the preceding book that poetic wisdom was the older wisdom of the peoples of Greece, who were first theological and later heroic poets, should carry as a necessary consequence that the wisdom of Homer was not at all different in kind,” etc. Clearly, “not at all different in kind” refers to Homer’s “poetic Wisdom” as he had inherited it “from first theological and later heroic poets.” Observe that Vico’s order here does not contradict his later conjecture at §856, which I cited above as an example of his reliance on Classical authority, that “*the vain diligence of the chronologists* [my emphasis; cf. Swift and Pope as compared above] has placed . . . [Hesiod] thirty years before Homer.” In §780 Vico establishes his knowledge of written authority by pointedly including the names of his sources—Plutarch, Dionysius Longinus, and Diogenes Laertius. And in accord with his “paradoxical” strategies throughout

the *Scienza Nuova*, the most crucial thing Vico does here is to have us understand that Homer is the culmination of a lineage of “heroic poets” who were not philosophers.

Notice the similarity of Vico’s line of thinking here with Nagy’s, in the sense that both are asserting that “Homer” as a cultural phenomenon is best understood as reflecting an evolutionary process. As evidence, I cite what amounts to a position statement from *Pindar’s Homer*:

Essentially, the hermeneutic model of Panhellenism must be viewed as an evolutionary trend extending into the Classical period, not some *fait accompli* that can be accounted for solely in terms of, say, the eighth century. In other words the concept of Panhellenism as I use it here is a relative one. Thus various types of Archaic Greek poetry, such as the elegiac tradition preserved by Theognis, make their bid for Panhellenic status considerably later than Homeric and Hesiodic poetry. . . .

I refer to this process, described here as crystallization, simply as textual fixation. I apply this notion of textual fixation to oral traditions with an emphasis on gradual patterns of fixity in an ongoing process of recomposition in diffusion, and without presupposing that the actual composition of the “text” required the medium of writing. . . .

By Panhellenic poetry, then, I mean those kinds of poetry and song that operated not simply on the basis of local traditions suited for local audiences. Rather, Panhellenic poetry would have been the product of an evolutionary synthesis of traditions, so that the tradition that it represents concentrates on traditions that tend to be common to most locales and peculiar to none. . . . Such a synthetic tradition would require a narrower definition than suitable for the kind of oral poetry and song described by Albert Lord on the basis of his field work in the South Slavic oral traditions. The difference is that such a tradition is in the process of losing the immediacy of the performer-audience interaction expected in the context of ongoing recomposition in performance. The teleology of this loss is

attested: in the historical period Homeric and Hesiodic as well as old elegiac and iambic poetry is being performed verbatim by rhapsôidoi 'rhapsodes' at Panhellenic festivals. . . .

The key concept in Nagy's differentiation here is that he identifies "Panhellenic poetry" as the relatively late result of a "synthesis of traditions." This argument resembles Vico's, which he perhaps expresses most succinctly here in Book III:

§860. Though Aristarchus emended Homer's poems, they still retain a great variety of dialects and many improprieties of speech, which must have been idiomatic expressions of [the] various peoples of Greece, and many licences in meter besides. On the other hand, we seemed compelled to posit a sort of half-way existence and to say that Homer was an idea or *heroic archetype* [*carattere*] of the Greeks who recounted their history in song [my emphasis].

The "proximate cause," as it were, of §860 (which, acknowledges Aristarchus, by consensus one of the best-regarded Alexandrian redactors of Nagy's Period 5) is the problem inherent in positing one historical, literary "Homer," given the obviously contradictory linguistic evidence. Vico realizes that the sustained Alexandrian project of assembling and preserving an "authentic text" flew in the face of the concept of a long, geographically decentralized antecedent oral tradition, which is a sound historical (that is, "anti-Cartesian") model for explaining the multiple Homeric "local idioms." Comparing Vico with Nagy here yields an enlightening affinity; Nagy writes that this final stage took place "not long after 150 BCE or so, which is a date that also marks the disappearance of the so-called 'eccentric' papyri." The factor that both men are recognizing is

the fundamental threat that the enterprise of redaction, whether Peisistratean or Alexandrian (which amounts to establishing “codes of decision,” to borrow the language of Wordsworth and Coleridge) posed to the heterogeneity that attends “Homer’s” Panhellenic origins. Though Vico does not say it outright in §860, he clearly thinks that the heterogeneity of the Homeric poems is evidence that they are actually best understood as Panhellenic cultural phenomena. He saves this insight to serve as the leading thesis of Book III, Section 2:

§873. When some of my friends, men remarkable for their acumen and scholarly learning, read my *New Science* in its less methodical first edition, they began to suspect that the traditional Homer had never existed, a thesis I had not yet conceived or formulated. In this light, the traditional accounts of Homer and his epics, combined with my own analysis of them, compel me to assert that the same thing happened to Homer as to the Trojan War. That is, it defines an important historical era, but the most perceptive critics agree that it never really took place. And like the Trojan War, if Homer had not left behind show’s great and certain vestiges in the form of his epics, so many difficulties would lead us to conclude that Homer was a purely ideal poet who in fact never existed as an individual. Faced with these difficulties on the one hand, and the extant poems

This “Introduction” is a portal through which Vico progresses toward his ultimate message, which he announces in his title to Chapter One of the section: “The Inconsistencies and Improbabilities of the Homer Hitherto Believed in Become Proper and Necessary in the Homer Herein Discovered.” In three insights that come in lightning succession, Vico discloses the sweepingly modern direction of his thought on the Homeric Question:

§875. . . . [T]he reason why the Greek peoples so vied with each other for the honor of being . . . [Homer's] fatherland, and why almost all claimed him as citizen, is that *the Greek peoples were themselves Homer*. [my emphasis]

§876. . . . [T]he reason why opinions as to his age vary so much is that *our Homer truly lived on the lips and in the memories of the peoples of Greece throughout the whole period from the Trojan war found to the time of Numa, a span of 460 years*. [my emphasis]

§878. [The] rhapsodes had exceptionally retentive memories, and, being poor, sustained life by singing the poems of Homer throughout the cities of Greece, and they were the authors of these poems inasmuch as they were part of these peoples who had composed their histories in the poems.

These remarkable observations represent Vico's logical conclusions from his view expressed at §856 that the “Rinaldi” poets were “modern” manifestations of ancient archetypes. In turn, this invocation of a popular oral tradition is based on a foundational thesis regarding Homer he has made back in §852:

By the etymology of their name from the two words which compose it, rhapsodes were stitchers together of songs, *and these were songs they most certainly have collected from no other than their own peoples*. [my emphasis]

It is striking that in §852 Vico looks beyond the issue of “Homer’s” identity to envision an *oral* scenario that encompasses a broad culture. Moreover, he implies that this era predates the fragmented status of the “stitched-together” songs.

Assuming that one accepts this progression from §852 to §875-§878 as genuine and significant, one can also accept Vico’s consistent tacit assumption

that his "rhapsode" was an Archaic *Panhellenic* form of the same sort of cultural practice which is Period 2 of Nagy's model. The strongest indication that there is a real affinity here comes, in my view, from Vico's two Nagy-like phrases: "the Greek peoples were themselves Greece" and "Homer truly lived on the lips and in the memories of the peoples of Greece." There is a methodological resemblance, as well. Vico's reference to the "'Rinaldi'" singers represents one of his few uses of *true* empirical evidence rather than anti-Cartesian literary authority to support a hypothesis. It is a fledgling attempt to provide his argument with a truly "scientific" element. Here, Vico anticipates, e.g., the Parry-Lord extrapolation from the *guslars* to various ancient oral traditions, as well as toward Nagy's tireless interest in reifying the "oral-evolutionary model" by seeking current instances from around the globe.

At the same time, Vico is being innovative, addressing the problem of Homeric fragmentation in a more conventional "pre-Wolfian" sense. Mazzotta has summed up this aim by remarking on the general belief in Vico's day that "the editorial unification of the Homeric poems, which originally were disjointed, fabulous popular proliferations, was willed by the Pisistratids [*sic*], at the Panathenaic festivals." He notes that Vico covers this topic in §§53-§56:

[T]his insight into the structural features of the compilation, which constitutes the Homeric encyclopedia . . . , gives access to an oblique reflection of Vico's: the link between poetry and politics, which is here represented by the tyrants' decision to unify into a false unity

the originally disjunct, heterogeneous, and contradictory Homeric poems. (p. 149)

Mazzotta also realizes full well that a Homeric encyclopedia conflicts with Vico's evolutionary theory; to wit:

[T]he stories sung by Demodokos or by Phemius [*sic*] in the *Odyssey* are . . . a *mise en abîme* of the "confused mass of material" (NS/853), of the "infinite difference" (NS/853) still visible in the styles of the two poems. The reason for this editorial falsification of the persistent, irreducible heterogeneity of the poems into a totalising, encompassing unity is political, and it emerges most clearly from the detail that the poems were to be sung at the Panathenaic festival (NS/854). (pp. 149-50)

Mazzotta rightly points out that the so-called "Peisistratean recension" is an "editorial falsification"; the question is whether Phemios and Demodokos represent this supposedly historical, essentially *literary* enterprise in Vico's own Homeric paradigm, or whether his concept actually emphasizes oral performance, as do the *Odyssey* episodes to which Mazzotta refers. The usual interpretation of these "singers" in Ithaka, and later in the Phaiakian court (which is, significantly for Nagy's emphasis on Panhellenism, far-flung from Odysseus' homeland) is as latecoming *mimēsis* of *aoidoi*—that is, of Nagy's "(re-)composers-in-performance." Significantly, on pottery Phemios is playing a lyre, which disqualifies him from being authentic in Nagy's paradigm. The reader will recall that in his contribution to the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Nagy insists, quite against the rhetorical force of most familiar iconography, that "the

Homeric testimony about the singer's singing to the accompaniment of the lyre belies synchronic reality of the rhapsode's reciting without any accompaniment at all." (p. 6)

I submit that this technicality is ultimately moot where Vico is concerned, since one naturally cannot expect him to have formulated such a distinction on information available to him. For this reason, it is hard to detect whether Vico differentiates in his mind between the poets-as-composers (*aoidoi*) and the *rhapsôidoi*—those who, much later, *recited* “Homer” professionally as a demonstration of their prodigious memories, a famous *mimēsis* being Plato’s *Ion*. (Let me hasten to point out that Vico’s apparent deficiency in this matter does not alienate him at all from Nagy’s position as he has stated it here: “It is simplistic and even misleading to contrast, as many have done, the ‘creative’ *aoidós* with the ‘reduplicating’ *rhapsôidós*.”¹⁶) I strongly suspect that it boils down to the fact that the only *étymon* available to Vico is the *rapsòdo*, for which he readily provides the etymology at §852 of “stitcher-together of songs.” This is a semantic explanation, by the way, which Nagy himself accepts as a part of the gradual mythologizing of textual fixation. He has noted that “in the scholia to Dionysius Thrax, Codex Venetus 489, it is reported that the Homeric poems

¹⁶ *Greek Mythology and Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 42.

were ‘sewn together’ (συνεργράφησαν) by Peisistratos himself” (*HQ*, p. 83). Here is yet another example of the principle I have stressed throughout whereby Vico expropriates, without acknowledging it, a *datum* from the authority of antiquity which he implements almost as if it were his own empirical *discoverta*. This usage is entirely consistent with the anti-Cartesian bent of Vico’s overall argument in the *Scienza Nuova* as Croce, *et al.*, have characterized it. Yet in one respect Vico’s instrumentation of “stitched-together” differs from Nagy’s. Outside of the sequence I have considered above, Vico makes little mention of Peisistratos—or of texts, for that matter. He apparently sees the phenomenon as a mnemonic feat performed by illiterate artists using material acquired piecemeal. Vico essentially tries to delete the element of textuality from the fragmented Homer of the Quarrel. Wherever he got the phrase, Vico “stitched-together” implies a process that corresponds to Nagy’s Panhellenic Period 2. By contrast, Nagy specifies that “sewn together” as he uses it in conjunction with Peisistratos and Cicero is an act of recording, and, by extension, of attempted “ownership,” that occurred far after Vico’s putative wandering bards. Proceeding further into Nagy’s model cancels this difference out. Eventually (*HQ*, pp. 84-88) Nagy brings Pindar into his argument, noting that this poet refers to Homer using, in separate texts, the faintly self-contradictory metaphors of “sequential” sewing (verb: *rhaptō*) and “integral” weaving (verb: *kuphainō*). He concludes:

I hold open the possibility that the eventual division of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* each into twenty-four books results from . . . the *cumulative* formation of episodes in the *process* of even weighting. (HQ, p. 88)¹⁷

Nagy's vision of the eventual *muligjørelse* of a standardized, "authoritative" circumscription of "Homer" as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey only* is not really in sympathy with Vico's downplaying of the Peisistratean recension in his image of Homer in Book III. Yet the things Vico actually says about the "rhapsodes" indicate to me that he has an intuitive grasp of an evolutionary process beginning with something like Nagy's Periods 1 and 2. The most revolutionary aspect of Vico's thought here is that in §875-§878 he, like Nagy, sees the absolute necessity of surmising a phase that antedated a fragmented collection of songs, whether this *amas* (using Perrault's famous word) were preserved orally or in transcripts. There is support for the notion that Vico understood that these poets in the *Odyssey* were nostalgic representations of the oral tradition. He comments:

§870. Homer himself describes as blind the poets who sing at the banquets of the great, such as the one who studies at the banquet given by Alcinous [i.e., Demodokos at *Odyssey* 8.64], and the one who sings at the feast of the suitors [i.e., Phemios at *Odyssey* 1.153 ff.].

¹⁷ "Even weighting" is the by-product of the evolutionary compression and expansion of Homeric episodes. "I propose," Nagy states earlier (p. 77) "that the evolution of ancient Greek epic involved a progression from *uneven weighting* toward *even weighting*."

This remark both displays Vico's acquaintance with Homer lore and paves the way for the argument he initiates at §873. It is also noteworthy that the Homeric reference to the blindness of the *aoidós* as "transferred" to "Homer" himself was fully accepted in antiquity as fact, as evidenced once again, by Lucian's tale.

In my view, Vico's phrase "confused mass of material" in §853 *obviously* reflects both a reliance on theories prevalent during the Quarrel that he rarely acknowledges, and an obligation to demonstrate that, as Professor of Latin Eloquence, he is duly aware of Cicero's "authoritative" inclusion of the mythical "recension" in his own remarks on Homer in the *De oratore* III,137. This being the case, a further question is: why does the opinion of Cicero (106-43 BCE), a Roman living centuries after even the most latecoming Homeric "rhapsode," carry such import? To begin answering this question, one must momentarily lay aside Vico's use of "confused mass" and consider once again the quote in question from the *De oratore*:

Quis doctior eisdem temporibus illis aut cuius eloquentia litteris instructor fuisse traditur quam Pisistrati? Qui primus Homeri libros confusos antea sic disposuisse dicitur, ut nunc habemus.

("Who was more learned in those times, and whose eloquence in letters became more "foundational," than Pisistratus? *It is said* ["dicitur"] he was the first to give the order we have now to the formerly confused books [cf. Vico's "confused mass" in §853; also in Perrault].

This allusion to a momentous event in Greco-Roman cultural history carries the same *gavitas* for Cicero, one senses, as the “Great Vowel Shift” does for students of English phonological history in still controversial questions like “When exactly and *why* did it happen?” “How long did it take?” and “How did it spread?” Cicero’s rhetoric cries out for analysis. First of all, he clearly sees the event as an editorial process, which predicates a written text. There is no hint of an oral “Homer” here. Moreover, speaking rather anachronistically, he is patently a Separatist rather than a Unitarian. I find, however, that the most tantalizing morsel of Cicero’s thinking is in *dicitur*; this little word is an appeal to the same brand of authority according to which Aeneas founded Rome, and Numa Pompilius (mythically, 715-673) became its second *rex* after its other “founder” Romulus. (Note that Vico’s reference to Numa in §876 reflects the same desire to link Greece and Rome in his own theories of cultural evolution.) Is it too brash to suggest that Cicero’s *dicitur* simultaneously undermines that same authority by conveying a *souçon* of doubt, or even risibility? My point is that while he may have thought about it, Cicero, as opposed to Vico, does not even want to touch the *elephants in camera*, so to speak, of a pre-literate Homeric tradition.

Joseph Farrell has recently focused on the undeniably tight connection between Homer and ancient Roman culture. From the start, he presents this

link as historically sound and validated through archeology:

[T]he historical Greek colonists of the eighth and seventh centuries brought with them stories of a heroic colonisation that was the direct result of the Greco-Trojan diaspora set in motion at the fall of Priam's city. The authoritative source to which these stories were traced was naturally Homer, which means not only the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* but also the epic cycle and Homer's followers in other poetic genres, such as Stesichorus and the tragic poets of Athens, as well as a rich artistic tradition that developed in intertextual relation to the Homeric poems and their literary descendants. This dispersion of authority prevents us from making facile assumptions about what is and is not "Homeric." But even if one takes a conservative approach, adopting a limited purview in order to concentrate on evidence that points to Homer specifically, a conviction emerges that the settling of Italy took place within a Homeric frame of reference.

The earliest Greek colonists brought to Italy culture that was every bit as Homeric as the ones they left behind, if not a bit more so. Important aspects of the culture were adopted by the Etruscans and adapted to their [p. 256] own practices. For the period of about 750 to 350 B.C. these developments are clearly illustrated by a series of monumental burials, one Greek and two Etruscan, in which Homeric elements play a central role.¹⁸

Having established for his general purposes the still rather murky historicity of the Greek → Etruscan → Roman sequence, Farrell proceeds to discuss how various Roman authors used their knowledge of Homer in Greek, through quotation, allusion, and parody, to comment upon Roman life, and thus forge a connection with Homeric themes like Achilles' "Heroic Code." I say "murky"

¹⁸ *The Cambridge Companion to Homer* (Cambridge U. Press, 2004), pp. 254-271.

because, *inter alia*, we have yet to decipher Etruscan writing, and hence must rely almost entirely on the evidence that Etruscan artefacts and iconography provide. Scholars are still skeptical about ancient Greek literary/historical versions of Etruscan origins such as we find in Herodotus, for example. Therefore, I suggest that although it is crucial to be cognizant of the “Etruscan filter” from an absolutist perspective, from a relativist one it is more important to see that the Romans themselves consistently sublimated it. As examples from outside literature, I cite Etruscan heirlooms such as the arch, the aqueduct, and Roman numerals as items the Romans thought of themselves as having invented. More directly, there is the fact that a huge proportion of the “Greek” statuary we have are Roman copies. This second-hand preservation is a *sēma* not only of the disappearance of Greek originals, but even more importantly of the obsessive level of Rome’s desire to preserve *sēmata* of its own cultural continuity with Greece.

Interestingly, Etruscan culture is a topic of early European history about which many of Vico’s contemporaries shared Farrell’s confidence, for the very reason that they believed themselves to have deciphered Etruscan inscriptions.

Harold Stone observes:

Eighteenth century scholars took seriously their contemporaries who claimed not only to read the Etruscan language, but to be arguing over the fine points of its grammar. They were much less impressed by Vico's rereading of ancient evidence and it is easy to

see why. The Etruscologists asked acceptance for an analysis based on evidence that no one understood, while Vico wished his readers to doubt everything they had read about archaic Greece and Rome based on his idiosyncratic interpretation of evidence. It was much easier for this culture to doubt the evidence of sense perception than to deny what it had memorized in its primary and secondary school education. One of the few gains of the contemporary decline of the general knowledge and interest in Greek and Roman literature and history in our academic training is that most of us have an easier time perceiving Vico's general point than did eighteenth century readers. (p. 314)

The key observation in this passage is that those who fancied themselves initiates in the arcane semiotics of Etruscan civilization “claimed [to have] . . . evidence that no one understood.” From today’s perspective, their confidence is insupportable. Stone seems to think that the more widespread familiarity with Classical literature in the eighteenth century than in the present day inhibited the acceptance of Vico’s ideas, implying that he either didn’t know the literature, misunderstood it, or found it irrelevant to his paradigm. Again I stress that Vico’s consistent recourse to Classical sources actually drives his thought. Etruscan culture *per se* has nothing to do with Homer in the *Scienza Nuova*, since Vico’s “authorities” were literary, historical, and synchronic. An example of this last category is his association of the “Rinaldi” singers with Horace as a frame for a Homer/Hesiod reference.

The upshot is that Vico received his model for Homer from ancient Rome and from the Quarrel rather than from the Etruscologist “craze” to which Stone refers.

One must emphasize that this interpretation is entirely in keeping with Roman versions of the relationship, as well. Cultured Romans had a high stake in seeing the Greco-Roman literary connection as direct. Farrell's conclusions make this point in no uncertain terms. He asks a series of rhetorical questions:

Why. . . did the Romans esteem Homer . . . [so much]? What made those who mattered in the most powerful nation on earth adopt the foundational texts of an alien culture as a central element in their own aristocratic self-fashioning? Was it indeed the influence of Homer's great Roman imitators in the field of epic—Livius Andronicus, Naevius, Ennius, Vergil—that made it so important for elite Roman readers to gain an accurate knowledge of Homer in the original Greek? Or is this not to put matters the wrong way around? Is it not far more likely that the Roman *epigoni* found their audience so receptive because that audience was already familiar not merely with the text of the canonical *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but was certain habits of interpreting those stories that had been practiced on Italian soil for centuries before the specifically literary imitations that we know ever came into being? Significant here is not merely the extensive frequency with which Homer sprang to the lips of educated Romans, but particularly the fact that this was as likely or perhaps even more likely to happen in trivial and humorous contexts as compared with serious occasions. Such habits seem to imply a very long tradition—longer, perhaps, than they recorded history of Roman literature—of comparing aspects of contemporary life to Homeric paradigms. In fact, self identification with the actions and characters depicted in Homer's epics and adoption of ideals embodied in those actions and characters, is characteristic not all he of Roman but other Italian elites as well. (p. 270)

This assessment articulates well the overriding reason for the propinquity educated Romans felt to Greek civilization: they wanted to preserve what they conceived to be their own diachronic heritage, as well. No wonder they took

such pains to let Athens flourish more or less *in statu quo* as the only place to get a first-rate education. But the relationship is even more dynamic than Farrell has presented it. The “Homeric frame of reference” he describes can be seen in the Romans’ paradoxical ever-present conflicting senses of virtual blood-relation with, yet inferiority to, the Greeks. A clear example is in the *Aeneid*, when the Greek-speaking survivor from the losing side, Aeneas, “made a refugee by Fate” (*fato profugus*) from Troy, prefigures / emulates¹⁹ the adventure-tossed Greek Odysseus (Ulysses) *dum conderet urbem*, “in order to found a city,” *inferretque deos Latio, genus unde Latinum*, “and in order to bring the (Trojan) gods into Latium, whence the Latin people.” Surprisingly, Farrell does not address this paradox directly; yet it penetrates Roman paradigms of language and literature. There are formal manifestations, such as the adapted Latin dactylic hexameter and the *mímēsis* of Homeric narrative components like the *Nekuía*. Beyond these obeisances, however, there is more than a hint of neurosis. Thus Vergil ends the first half of his epic with a picture of the major cultural consequences of Aeneas’ heroism. In Book 6, there is an extended passage, ‘re-enacting’ (cf. Aristotle / Nagy) at once Teiresias in the *Nekuía* and Priam’s catalogue of the Trojan heroes for Helen as the two of them stand on the Trojan walls. In Vergil’s *mímēsis* of Homer, Aeneas views a parade of representations (*mímēsēs*) of

Romans who are to follow his founding of the state, culminating in Vergil's patron Augustus. The spirit of the Roman hero's father Anchises (standing in, as it were, for Teiresias and Priam) sums up his comparison of Greek and Roman heroes:

Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento.
Hae tibi erunt artes: pacique imponere morem,
Parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.²⁰ (ll. 851-53)

²⁰ In Book II, "Poetic Wisdom," Vico cites this line to make a specific point about the development of Roman society, and, by implication, European culture in general. After referring to the origination of deities in a Greek context, he gives the etymology of the Roman counterpart of Kronos, Saturn, as from *sati*, "sown fields." He then comments:

§553. . . . [T]o borrow the language of the jurists [.] . . . Grotius's simpletons and Pufendorf's abandoned men had recourse to the altars of the strong to save themselves from Hobbes's violent men. . . . Thereupon the strong, with a fierceness born of their union in the society of families, slew the violent who had violated their lands, and took under their protection the miserable creatures who had fled from them. And above the heroism of nature which was theirs as having been born of Jove [i.e., Iuppiter] or engendered under his auspices, there now shone forth prominently in them the heroism of virtue. In this heroism the Romans excelled all other peoples of the earth, practicing precisely these to aspects of it, sparing the submissive and vanquishing the proud. . . .

Two things are notable in these remarks that relate to my argument. First, there is Vico's seamless movement from Greek to Roman religion. Second, the mention of three recent legalist contractarians confirms that Vico hungered for involvement in the big Continental social debates, and was accordingly developing a competitive paradigm of his own. This paragraph is an excellent epitome of Vico's technique of invoking quasi-historical *fantasia*, through Classical *auctoritas*, to approximate an anti-Cartesian scientific method.

My introduction of material demonstrating this implementation at this

("These will be *your* skills: to impose a more of peace,
To be sparing of those who accept [Roman] hegemony,
And to demilitarize the insolent."—my translation)

This prediction has been, in effect, set up by a catalogue (ll. 756-845), an epic time-voyage featuring legendary Trojan and Roman founder-figures, a few of them historical (e.g., Cato the Elder, the Gracchi, and Augustus' own Uncle Iulius).²¹ Buried in Vergil's "shock and awe" genealogy, there is a quasi-Plutarchan element of Greco-Roman comparison at lines 838-39:

eruet ille Argos Agamemnoniasque Mycenae
ipsumque Aeaciden, genus armipotens Achilli . . .

([Another descendant (?), "ille"] will dismantle Mycenaean
Agamemnon's Argos,
And so [belatedly] wreak vengeance on Aeacus himself, the grandsire
of the potent warrior Achilles." My translation)

Exactly which Roman Vergil means by "ille" remains controversial. Some scholars attribute the ambiguity the fact that much of the epic was unfinished at Vergil's death. But what if his vagueness is in this case somehow deliberate? If his actual poetic interest is in reminding his audience of a Homeric connection,

particular juncture was opportune because of Vico's gloss. I discuss his constant syncopation of Greece and Rome in Book II of the *Scienza Nuova* more fully in my next section.

²¹ Regarding the political uses of Homer, Nagy writes, "The distinction between historical tyrants on the one hand and mythical lawgivers or sages is oftentimes blurred." (*Questions*, p. 74). Note how aptly this observation about the Greek tyrants' motives applies to my analysis of what Vergil is doing, as well.

omitting a specific referent for “ille” furthers this purpose, since it focuses attention on cultural *kótos*²² itself rather than an historical agent.

While the immediate referents in *Aeneid* 6 are etiological, military and political, I submit that its manifest force is metonymic for the entire cultural relationship. A tongue-in-cheek but epideictically defensible way of expanding Vergil’s {Anchises / Teiresias / Priam} set in lines 851-53 is as follows: “The Greeks may have had their Homer; and Hesiod; and Pindar; and Aeschylus; and Sophocles; and Euripides; and Demosthenes; and Herodotus; and Xenophon; and Thucydides; and Solon; and Lycurgus; and Themistocles; and Pericles; and Alexander the Great; and Archimedes; and Eratosthenes; and Euclid; and Hippocrates; and Socrates; and Plato; and Aristotle, and Praxitiles; and Myron; *ET CETERI*—but whom will Greece eventually fall to? Why *us*, by Iuppiter! And how shall we treat them? Why, we shall actually *reward* their relatively complaisant submission (compared to that of Karthage, for instance!) to the military and political domination only we Romans can exercise (not to mention the order Roman law naturally brings to any people lucky enough to come under our aegis), by peaceably assimilating Greek culture—and *loving* it!” This sort of defensive response to the spell Greek civilization held over Rome even

²² This is Homeric Greek for the rage of the vendetta, as when Odysseus and Telemakhos bring about “closure” by slaughtering Penelope’s suitors.

omits the fact that most Roman war-machines, as well as many military strategies, were based on Greek prototypes, as well.

I intend my farcical hyperbole to underscore why it is that Cicero orated in Greek in the Roman senate; why the shocked and dying Caesar asked the conspirator Brutus “*Kai su, teknon?*” (“You too, son?”) and not Shakespeare’s “*Et tu, Brute?*”; and most pertinently, why Cicero felt compelled to take up the Peisistratean recension of Homer as a sub-topic natural to Latin oratorical theory. The answer is that, in a weird way, Rome *was* Greece—though not necessarily “improved”—to the Romans of Cicero’s era and class. (Somehow, I cannot help thinking strangely pertinent Catherine Earnshaw’s famous epiphany, “I *am* Heathcliff!”) In this vein, Richard Thomas remarks:

I suppose I have been suggesting, paradoxically, that [Vergil was] the poet who did the most, pace Ennius, to equate Latin with Greek on the level of promoting it to a considerable and universal literary language [and] at the same time flirted with the opposite, with directing his verse to the roots to which it is immediately tied. If Vergil, why not Cicero, whose Latinity, at the forefront with that of Vergil, ensured that preservation of the language and culture that we study? . . . Cicero in general has a cultural linguistic program quite similar to that of Vergil: the Latin language and culture can match that of Greece; this is what Ciceronian periodicity is all about.²³

Nor did this copula perish with Augustan Rome. Plutarch (*ca.* C.E. 45-125) is

²³ *Reading Vergil and His Texts: Studies in Intertextuality* (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 244.

perhaps antiquity's most shining example of someone who strove constantly to reify the Greece-Rome continuum. It is important to recognize that he was doing so some time after Cicero and Vergil, a fact which testifies to the perdurability of the linkage. In *Homeric Questions*, Nagy examines in detail various stories of a textual recension. He notes that the mythical unification of Homeric stories from Archaic times has the support not only of Cicero, but also of the "authorities" Herodotus in his *Histories*; "Plato" in the spurious *Hipparchus*; and Plutarch. A major bone of contention becomes whether Athens or Sparta, cultures in the Panhellenic sphere which in most things were so utterly polarized, could take credit for this project. To address the Spartan provenance, Nagy provides this translation from Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus*:

For there was already a not-too-bright fame attached to these epics among the Greeks, and some of them were in possession [verb *kéktemai*] of some portions, since the poetry had been scattered about by chance, and it was Lycurgus who was the first to make it [i.e., the poetry] well-known. (p. 72)

"Scattered about" not only suggests Cicero's "libros confusos," it could arguably serve as the template for all similar language used to evaluate Homer's *literatur'nost'* during the Quarrel. Taken together, these opposing claims justify Nagy's conclusion:

On the basis of the other narrative traditions . . . concerning the topic of an archetypal text that disintegrates in the distant past only to become reintegrated at a later point by a sage who then gives it

as a gift to his community, the story of a “Peisistratean recension” can be explained as a *mūthos* that bears clear signs of political appropriation by the Peisistratidai. Particularly striking is the parallelism in the accounts of Plutarch and Cicero between Lycurgus, lawgiver of Sparta who gives his community the Homeric poems, and Peisistratos, described as one of the Seven Sages, who likewise gives his community of Athens the Homeric poems. . . . Greek myths about lawgivers, whether they are historical figures or not, can to reconstruct these figures as the originators of the sum total of customary law. . . . (p. 74)

Nagy’s two examples of textual “ownership,” of Homer—Cicero and Plutarch—are Roman, though the latter was “hyper-Hellenized,” so to speak. I also cite his phrase “sum total of customary law” as an echo (albeit independent) of Leon Pompa’s remark that Vico’s work reflects his conviction “that any given society is unified by communal modes of thought and attitude which are the products of the history of its own institutional developments, directly support[ing] Vico’s conclusion that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are products of different historical societies.” What I am driving at is that Vico’s concentration on Homer in Book III entails a relationship that forcefully corroborates Nagy’s point about lawgiver myths being *post facto* etiological orderings.

In summary, then, the Greco-Roman continuum is a prominent feature of Vico’s perspective on the Homeric Question, which he understands through the ancient “authorities” themselves, as providing a credible historical framework that has been supplemented by empirical contemporary art forms. Some of

these, such as the *cantastorie*, are, in effect, “descendent forms” with which Vico is personally familiar. It is Vico’s apprehension of the relationship between the ancient and the modern that make him particularly incisive. And I stress here that it would be a mistake to believe that the rise of modern linguistics and archaeology immediately discredited Vico’s representation, roughly from Books II through IV of the *Scienza Nuova*, of a natural, quasi-“Aristotelian” evolution from “Greek” to “Roman” civilization in antiquity. In fact, one can discern a need to preserve such a foundational seamlessness in even as discriminating a critical view as that of Wilamowitz. As Albert Henrichs has noted:

Wilamowitz sah die Antike von Homer bis zum Ende des römischen Weltreichs als kulturelles Kontinuum. Das von ihm angestrebte und auch realisierte Ideal war ein universales Verständnis der gesamten “griechisch-römischen Kultur” in all ihren Erscheinungsformen.²⁴

(“Wilamowitz saw antiquity from Homer all the way to the end of the Roman Empire as a cultural continuum. The ideal which he both strived for and realized was a universal understanding of the entire ‘Greco-Roman culture’ in all its manifest forms.” My translation.)

Henrichs stresses that Wilamowitz adopted this view quite consistently.

Speaking in 1914 in the of the Classicist’s role, Wilamowitz says, “Doch ist seine productive Tätigkeit immer von der Hinterlassenschaft der Hellenen

²⁴ Albert Henrichs, “Nachwort” to Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Geschichte der Philologie* third edition (Stuttgart und Leipzig: B.G. Treubner, 1998), p. 82.

ausgegangen; er var Philologe.” (“Indeed, his productive activity always came out of the Hellenic legacy; he was a “philologist.” *Ibid.*) Lest one be tempted, however, to assume that by *Philologe* Wilamowitz confined his definition to textual scholars like Richard Bentley, one must allow Henrichs to finish his assessment:

Aber Philologie erschöpfte sich für ihn keineswegs in Sprachwissenschaft, Literaturgeschichte, oder Textkritik Von bloßer “Wortphilologie”, wie sie Richard Bentley (1662-1742), Gottfried Hermann (1772-1848) und Karl Lachmann (1793-1851) betrieben haben, hielt er nichts : “Aber Philologie ist nun einmal mehr.” (*ibid.*,)

(“But for him, the scope of *Philologie* was in no way exhausted by ‘science of language,’ ‘history of literature,’ or ‘textual criticism.’ . . . He had little regard for mere ‘textual study’ [*Wortphilologie*] as practiced by Richard Bentley (1662-1742), Gottfried Hermann (1772-1848) und Karl Lachmann (1793-1851) ‘But now *Philologie* is something else again.’”)

—My translation, with the kind consultation of Professor Henrichs

Wilamowitz was a *Philologe* in much the same way as Vico was a *filólogo*; both defined “philology” in a way that encompassed knowledge of cultural evolution, with language itself forming only one aspect of that process.²⁵

Throughout this study I have maintained that Vico and Bentley must be considered together as epitomizing Homer’s oral-versus-written duality if we are

²⁵ Note that to make this point about Wilamowitz, Henrichs compares him, in passing, with Richard Bentley.

to understand how Vico stands out, and to appreciate fully the prescience, modernity, and persistent influence of his theories in contrast to those of contemporaries. It is largely *because* Vico and Bentley were contemporaries with markedly different skills, backgrounds, and purposes that they provide such a replete perspective on how The Homeric Question was formulated in the eighteenth century. In consistently refusing to let his definition of *Philologie* be circumscribed by the “writerly” terminology once typical of Classical scholarship—e.g. “literary history” and “textual criticism”—Wilamowitz vindicates the belief I share with Gregory Nagy that Vico anticipated even the great F.A. Wolf in making today’s Homer controversies “possible.”

8. FROM *ÉKPHRASIS* TO *AUCTORITAS*: HOW VICO USES THE CLASSICAL CORPUS TO AUTHENTICATE HIS “HOMER”

If Vico’s portrait of Homer in Book III anticipates modern theories that stress oral diachronics, there remains one large interpretive problem. In other parts of the work, “Homer” serves a purpose that requires “him,” as a single recorded poetic voice purporting to give historical accounts, to be simultaneously an anthropological authority in a very formal “literary” sense. This other, previous, and much more conventional usage represents an analogue of Nagy’s Periods 4 and 5. Yet Vico himself does not explicitly signal the dichotomy. It is almost as if Book III comes upon us as a lengthy, anomalous conjecture rather than the product of a “new science.” But such a “take” is hasty: “La Discoverta del vero Omero” exists precisely because he considers this component a necessary illumination of his anthropological ideas as they apply throughout the *Scienza Nuova*. And yet, as Vico states in §23 of the “Idea of the Work,” “Homer left none of his poems in writing.”

How are we to interpret this discrepancy? Though it may seem counterintuitive, one productive strategy for approaching the problem is to work backward in search of Vico’s motive for needing a “true Homer.” The reason I have been so expansive on the subject the “Greco-Roman continuum” is to

provide a framework for demonstrating how, outside of Book III, Vico uses another, “standard” Homer for bolstering claims he makes regarding the development of ancient *Roman* (i.e., pre-Christian European) social practices from earlier *Greek* ones. In the meantime, he also insinuates familiar foundational accounts from the Book of Genesis that transform this duality into yet another of his triads. In an early passage in Book II, “Poetic Wisdom,” Vico writes:

§508. . . . [F]abulous [i.e., “mythical”] Greek history describes Hercules (a . . . character of founders of nations), as born of Alcmena by a bolt of Jove [Zeus/Juppiter; see Appendix One]. Another great hero of Greece is Bacchus, born of thunderstruck Semele. This was the first reason for which the heroes called themselves sons of Jove; the assertion was the truth of the senses for them, persuaded as they were that all things were the work of the gods. And this is the meaning of that passage of Roman history in which, to the patricians who said in the heroic contests that the auspices were theirs, the plebs replied that the fathers of whom Romulus had composed the senate, and from whom the patricians traced their descent, *non esse cælo demissos*, “were not descended from heaven” . . .

Here Vico plays the role of the mythographer—that is, someone interested in the way early peoples interpreted their origins through ancient stories of superhuman entities and their adventures. In this same paragraph there is an

excellent example of how Vico can use an etymological leap²⁶ to reinforce the Greco-Roman continuum:

. . . [T]o signify . . . *connubium*, or the right to contract solemn nuptials, whose chief solemnity was the auspices of Jove, was the prerogative of the heroes, they represented nubile Love as winged and blindfolded in token of his modesty, and called him *Eros*, and name similar to *heros*, hero, which was their own.

At first it seems that Vico is explaining the origin of a specifically Roman manifestation of the marriage institution, since *connubium* is Latin. He is saying that early pagan (*gentile*) Italian culture civilized innocent young love by solemnizing it with a term linguistically encompassing “youth” itself, placing marriage under the protection of Iuppiter through a kind of ritual neologism. To understand fully the source of this development in Vico’s paradigm, we must go back to §506-7, where he presents this picture of early couples:

§506. . . . [F]or husbands shared their first human ideas with their wives, beginning with the idea of a divinity of theirs which compelled them to drag their women into their caves; and that even this primitive [my rendering of *volgare*; Bergin and Fisch use the cognate “vulgar”] metaphysics began to know the human mind in God. And from this first point of all human institutions pagan (*gentile*) men began to praise the gods, in the ancient Roman legal sense of citing or calling them my name; whence the phrase *laudare auctores*, bidding men to cite the gods as authors of whatever they themselves did. . . .

²⁶ I argue that since they predate the era of *Sprachlehre* by a few years, his etymologies are all educated guesses, even when they are “correct.”

§507. From this most ancient origin of marriage came the custom by which women enter the families and houses of the men they marry. This natural custom of the *gentes* [i.e., the Roman clan system; cf. *gentile*, but not necessarily Gentile] was preserved by the Romans, among whom women were regarded as daughters of their husbands and sisters of their children. Thus not merely must marriage have been from the beginning a union with one woman only, as it continued to be among the Romans (a custom Tacitus [*Germania* 17] admires in the ancient Germans, who like the Romans kept intact the first institutions of their nations, and who give us ground for conjecturing similar [monogamous] beginnings for all others), but it must have been a union to last for life, as indeed remained the custom among a great many peoples. Hence among the Romans marriage was defined with this property in view, as *individua vitae consuetudo*, unbroken companionship . . . [for] life; and divorce was introduced very late among them.

Through the *auctoritas* of Tacitus, Vico has sought to establish the civilizing effect of marriage as an institution by connecting two pagan cultures. His citation is particularly interesting since the Roman historian Tacitus actually wrote in the Christian era (*ca.* 106). Meanwhile, his phrase *individua vitae consuetudo* quietly invokes Christian Canon law, and refers to what is known as “rotal” or matrimonial jurisprudence.

Beneath Vico’s mythographic ambiguity lies the tripartite connection he is always seeking. As I have indicated above, his study of ancient pagan cultures is supported by a foundation of biblical history. To reinforce this idea, I quote from an earlier passage in Book II, from a chapter entitled “The Universal Flood and the Giants”:

§371. The founders of pagan [*gentile*] humanity must have been men of the races of Ham, Japheth, and Shem, which gradually, one after the other, renounced that true religion of their common father Noah [i.e., foundational Judaism]. . . . As a result of this renunciation, they dissolved their marriages and broke up their families by promiscuous intercourse, and began roving wild through the great forest of the earth. . . . By fleeing from the wild beasts with which the great forest must have abounded, and by pursuing women, who in that state must have been wild . . . they became separated from each other in their search for food and water. . . .

Concerning this account, Mazzotta comments that “the Flood marks the difference between giantism and the founders of the gentile nations and the Hebrews who were of normal size” (*ibid.*, p. 244). On this view the monogamy Vico praises among the Romans and Germans in §507 as a *sēma* of cultural progress that forms a “Vichian triplet” (a pattern, remember, which Vico says he has received from Varro’s *Antiquities* and other mythic narratives of archaic history, notably that of Hesiod) with ancient Hebrew etiology. And thus ultimately, for Vico the seed of the Noah story is planted in Genesis 2:18: “And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him an help meet for him.” (KJV)

Getting back to paragraph §508, notice that, as opposed to civilizing *connubium*, when it comes to love itself, rather than being consistent by using the Latin *Cupido*, Vico invokes Eros. His purpose (which one can plausibly consider rather disingenuous *asyndeton*) is essentially rhetorical; the switch from Latin context back to Greek setting he established at the paragraph’s head allows

him to trace connubial practices (again through etymology) back to the age of the heroes, who are a principal subject of Book II. Meanwhile, he is also insinuating a biblical authority, *Genesis* 6,4: “There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown [i.e., “heroes”; compare Greek *kléos*, “renown”]. (KJV).²⁷ Vico now goes his merry way in §509, resorting again to etymology to reveal the “true” source of the term “nuptials” (*nozze*):

§509. The second solemnity is the requirement that the women be veiled in token of the sense of shame that gave rise to the first marriages in the world. The custom has been preserved by all nations; among the Latins it is reflected in the very name “nuptials”; for *nuptiae* is from *nubendo*, which means “to cover.” And in the returned barbarians times maidens were called virgins *in capillo*, in [uncovered] hair, in distinction from married women, who go about veiled.

Vico has numbered his “solemnities”; therefore, one can expect him to complete the triplet, and he does not disappoint:

§510. The third solemnity—also preserved by the Romans—was a certain show of force in taking a wife, recalling the real violence with which the giants dragged the first wives into their caves. And

²⁷ The circumspect reader will note that the biblical picture of the heroes’ genesis through coitus between primordial giants and humans is essentially the same as in the Greco-Roman pattern. Herakles (immortal Zeus + mortal Alkmene) and Achilles (mortal Peleus + immortal Thetis) are fundamental examples. Vico must surely have recognized that this similarity furthers his purpose, so prescient of Jung, of establishing universal cultural archetypes through comparative mythology.

by analogy with the first lands which the giants had occupied by taking physical possession of them, properly wedded wives were said to be *manuaptae*, taken by force.

Quite obviously, Vico is indicating (in the sense of the Greek verb *semáinō*, also translatable as “to give a sign”; compare “semantics”) “The Rape of the Sabine Women” as told by Livy (*Ab urbe condita* 1.9-13) and Ovid (*Ars amatoria*, 1.109-134). Consider, for instance, the consonance between Vico’s tableau of early Roman barbarity in §503 and this passage from Livy:

9. Iam res Romana adeo erat ualida ut cuilibet finitimarum civitatum bello par esset; sed penuria mulierum hominis aetatem duratura magnitudo erat, quippe quibus nec domi spes prolis nec cum finitimis conubia essent.

(“By now the Roman state was so strong that it was on a par with any neighbor in war; but its prominence was threatened because of a shortage of women to men, so that there was no hope of producing another generation, either domestically or through intermarriages with bordering peoples.” My translation)

Romulus’ solution to this problem was to trump up some games in Neptune’s honor. Then, while the male contestants invited from the Sabine tribes were distracted by the spectacle of athletes striving for *fama*, the Romans carried off (“raped”) their women-folk. Note that Livy uses diction that manifestly prefigures Vico’s perspective at §§506-8—e.g., *civitatum*; *domi spes prolis*; *connubia*.

Vico never abandons his tripartite model. In fact, it actually seems to encompass more and more as his scenario in Book II becomes less associated with literary authority and more with linguistics. As he moves along to Section IV of Book II, entitled “Poetic Economy,” it becomes clear that he has had an anthropological argument building all the time, culminating in extraordinary passages like this:

§526. [A]bove all else, it was with reference to . . . perennial springs that the sharing of water was the occasion for families being brought together in their vicinity. Hence the first communities were called *phratrai* by the Greeks [cf. *phrear*, well, *phreatia*, cistern], and the first lands were called *pagi* by the Latins, like the Dorian Greek for spring, *paga*, that is, water, the first of the two solemnities of marriage. For the Romans celebrated marriage *aqua et igni* because the first marriages were naturally contracted between men and women sharing the same water and fire, that is, of the same family; whence marriage must have begun between brothers and sisters And the *lar* of each house was the god of the fire aforesaid; hence *focus laris* for the hearth where the family father sacrificed to the household gods. In the Law of the Twelve Tables, in the article on parricide, according to the reading of Jacob Raewaerd, these gods are called *deivei parentum*. A similar expression is frequently found in Holy Scripture: *Deus parentum nostrorum*, the God of our fathers, or, more explicitly, *Deus Abraham*, *Deus Isaac*, *Deus Iacob*, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. On this matter there is also the law proposed by Cicero, *Sacra familiaria perpetua manento*, “let sacred family rites be perpetually maintained” [*De legibus*, 2.9.22]²⁸. . . .

²⁸ Vico is “re-remembering” Cicero’s exhortation in the name of rotal law: “Ex patriis ritibus optima colunt.” (“Let us maintain the best among the rites of our forefathers.”)

A close analysis of the sequence of Vico's thinking is illuminating. The initiating factor is biological: the organic need for water, which has drawn these primitives together into a bond symbolized by *aqua et ignis* as totems of gender differentiation. Through comparative etymology, Vico attempts to reify the inference that the phenomenon is cross-cultural. He then notes that the originally small count of these groups must have necessitated sibling incest before they could "be fruitful and multiply." This idea closely resembles Livy's rationale for the "Rape of the Sabine Women": *sed penuria mulierum hominis aetatem duratura magnitudo erat*. It also brings to mind the ancient Egyptian practice, which is essentially a counter-example to Genesis-Livy-Ovid that is to our modern sensibilities almost revolting, in which the Pharaoh married his sister to maintain regal purity. Significantly, Vico does not mention the Egyptians in §526 and following, whereas they are among the cultures that generally form the basis of his anthropological paradigms. To refer specifically to the Egyptians in §526 would have served his universalizing objective impressively, since this particular royal custom is well attested historically. I speculate that he was fully aware of the Egyptian practice, but saw no need to endanger the *auctoritas* of his Greek-Roman-Hebrew triplet by introducing a fourth ancient culture in this particular *locus*.

Note also that this trio is out of chronological sequence. It is often stressed that throughout his writings Vico reserves for the ancient Hebrews the original and special relationship with God portrayed in the Old Testament, which in his model precludes in them the barbarous original characteristics (*caratteri*) of early Greco-Roman culture. In paragraph §526 and elsewhere Vico underscores the primacy of the Hebrews by placing them last rhetorically. Our Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Naples is using *hysteron proteron*, “placing the origin toward the end.” Doing so puts the ancient Hebrews at an unpolluted temporal remove from vulgar (*volgare*) early European cultural improvising. This strategy is consistent with his vision in §371 of the Greeks and Romans as implicitly “fallen”: “The founders of pagan [*gentile*] humanity must have been men of the races of Ham, Japheth, and Shem [a triplet with the *imprimatur* of Scripture, no less], which gradually, one after the other, renounced that true religion of their common father Noah.”

Vico is not finished establishing the ancient Hebrews, not only as temporally and hieratically separated from Greece and Rome, but—*quite paradoxically*—as the initiators of cultural patterns which those later civilizations “reenacted” in many respects. He thus successfully reinforces the tripartite structure of his grand argument. This feat, which is essentially rhetorical, in turn allows him to concentrate on his spectrum leading from (and thus palpably

“welding”) the Greeks to the Romans. Once again he utilizes mythology and etymology to accomplish his purpose. He returns to the theme he has almost certainly seen validated in his thinking through Genesis and Livy of the set: {primordial giants; barely legitimate *connubium*; water; a graduated acculturation):

§527. . . . [T]he Styx, by which the gods swore, was the source of the springs; hence these gods must have been the nobles of the heroic cities, for the sharing of the water and given them *dominion* over [the plebeians, whom they called] men. Hence down to the 309th year of Rome the patricians excluded the plebs from *connubium*. Apropos of all this, we often read in Holy Writ of [Beer-sheba,] “well of the oath” or “oath of the well.” Thus the city of Pozzuoli preserves in its name an indication of its great antiquity, for it was called *Puteoli* on account of the number of small wells it united. And it is a reasonable conjecture. . . . that the many cities with plural names scattered through the ancient nations received their differently articulated names from what was in substance one and the same [principle of etymological association].

Vico stays true to his method. He uses Beer-sheba to reinforce the Greco-Roman association of the Styx with *connubium*, simultaneously lending an air of priority to the equivalent Hebrew ceremonial form by tagging it as “holy (*santa*).” The interesting transition is from Beer-sheba to the etymology of “Pozzuoli” using “thus,” which we must interpret in this case as meaning “similarly.” Most scholars have seen Vico’s faith in the insights of his cross-connections as sincere; but may I be so disruptive as to suggest that from the perspective of someone *constructing* a model he purports to be revolutionary, these “well stories” serve as

further examples of *asyndeton*, the strategy of hurrying past a connection he is hoping his audience will buy into before they can actually understand it. Vico then engages in the strategy of *exergasia*, the working out of the rhetorical direction through expansion:

§528. From the source imagination (*fantasia*) conceived the third major deity, Diana, representing the first human need [i.e., that of water] which made itself felt among the giants when they had settled on certain lands and united in marriage with certain women. The theological poets have described the history of these things in two fables of Diana. The first, signifying the modesty of marriage, tells of Diana silently lying with the sleeping Endymion under the darkness of night; so that Diana is chaste with the chastity referred to in a law proposed by Cicero, *Deos caste eunto*, that one should go to the sacrifice only after making the sacred ablutions. The other tells of the fearful religion of the water springs, to which was attached the perpetual epithet of sacred. It is the tale of Actaeon, who, seeing Diana naked (the living spring) and being sprinkled with water by the goddess (to signify that the goddess cast over him the great awe of her divinity, was changed into a stag (the most timid of animals) and torn to pieces by his dogs (the remorse of his own conscience for the violation of religion). Hence *lymphati* (properly, sprinkled with *lympa* or pure water) must have been originally a term applied to the Actaeons who had been maddened by superstitious terror. This poetic history was preserved by the Latins in their word *latices* (evidently from *latendo*), to which is always added the epithet *puri*, and which means the water gushing from a spring. The *latices* of the Latins must be identical with the Greek nymphs, handmaidens of Diana, for *nymphai* in Greek meant the same as *lymphai*. The nymphs were so named at a time when all things were apprehended as animate and for the most part human substances.

Vico has led us into a sub-argument that from a modern point of view is specious: through *hysteron proteron* and his usual speculative etymology, he

implies that the ancient Roman and Greek cultures were one and the same, maintaining the aforementioned common historical misconception while clearly foreshadowing Wilamowitz's *Kontinuum*. Lest we be tempted to react condescendingly to Vico's naive *fantasia* on this point, we should recall Joseph Farrell's claim, quoted earlier, that "even if one takes a conservative approach, adopting a limited purview in order to concentrate on evidence that points to Homer specifically, a conviction emerges that the settling of Italy took place within a Homeric frame of reference."

Farrell's comment is my initial response to a question the reader should be asking by now: What, specifically, do these tripartite patterns have to do with Vico's specific ideas about Homer? The answer comes as we anticipate the *clinamen*, the Lucretian swerve of his rhetorical focus away from the divinely protected Hebrews toward the Greco-Roman continuum. At first Vico preserves the triplet in order to reinforce his own analytical authority:

§529. . . . [T]he grave marker was called by the Greeks the *phylax*, or guardian, because these simple people believed that the post would guard the grave. *Cippus* the Latin named for the post, came to mean sepulcher, and *ceppo* in Italian means the trunk of a geological tree. *Phylax* must accordingly have been the origin of the Greek *phylē*, a tribe. And the Romans set forth their genealogies by placing the statues of their ancestors in rows along the halls of their houses, and these rows were called *stemma*. (This term must have been

derived from *temen*, thread; whence *subtemen* for the thread that is carried under the weft in weaving cloth.). . .

§530. From the same origin must have come to the word *filius*, which, qualified by the name or house of the father, signified noble, precisely as the Roman patrician was defined as one *qui potest nomine ciere patrem*, “who can name his father.” And the names of the Romans were really patronymics, which were so often used by the first Greeks; Homer, for example, calling the heroes *filii Archivorum*, “sons of the Achaeans”; and in like fashion in Holy Scripture *filii Israel* is used by the nobles of the Hebrew people. . . .

Vico now returns to Livy as an *auctoritas* on Romulus *qua* archaic hero, whom he treats—more than implicitly—as a Roman *mimēsis* of Herakles, Achilles, and Odysseus. It is noteworthy that Vico takes the unexpected step of disparaging Livy’s portrayal of Romulus, while simultaneously relating it back to the old population issue:

§532. . . . Livy [1.8.5] perverted the heroic phase of Romulus and the fathers who were his companions where he makes them say . . . a barefaced lie. . . . For on the one hand Romulus was recognized as of the royal family of Alba . . . [and therefore noble, or “son of the earth”], and on the other hand their mother [Earth] had been so unjust to them as to give birth only to men, so that they had to carry off the Sabine women to be their wives. . . . We must therefore say that, in the manner the first people had of thinking in poetic characters [i.e., “images”], Romulus, regarded as founder of a city, was invested with the qualities proper to the founders of the first cities of Latium, and the midst of a great number of which Romulus founded Rome.

Surreptitiously, Vico here maintains his foundational separation between the Hebrews on one hand and Greco-Roman culture on the other. By now he does

so through the paradoxical device of dropping the Hebrews from the discussion. Meanwhile, he explicitly names the proto-Romantic instrument that has been actuating his anti-Cartesian thrust all the while:

§533. Imagination [*fantasia*] here created the fourth divinity of the so-called greater *gentes*; namely, Apollo, apprehended as god of civil light: Thus the heroes were called *kleitōi*, resplendent, by the Greeks, from *kleos*, and they were called *inklyti* by the Latins, from *cluer*, the splendor of arms. . .

Fantasia is inimical to everything Descartes thought he stood for, because it is patently obstructive to forming “clear and distinct ideas” (this despite the great French rationalist’s flight of fancy in the opening of his *Meditations* urging the reader to imagine him “seated by the fire in a winter dressing-gown.”) *Fantasia* is the mental faculty through which Vico hammers home the equity he has been working so hard to validate between Roman and Greek civilization. This nexus hides a reference to Homer in the word *klēos*, which he “misreads” as a light metaphor, but which actually designates the generational “re-composition-in-performance” of heroic song. Notice that Vico ascribes this latter semantic function to the Romans—and conspicuously denies to the Greeks by default—in his very next paragraph:

§534. Further, Apollo is the brother of Diana, for the perennial springs made possible the founding of the first nations on the mountaintops; wherefore Apollo has his seat on Mount Parnassus, where dwell the Muses (the arts of humanity), near the fount of Hippocrene, whose waters give drink to the swans, birds that sing in

in that sense in which the Latin verbs *canere* and *cantare* mean “to foretell.” Under the auspices of these swans, Leda conceives two eggs and from one of them gives birth to Helen and from the other to the twins Castor and Pollux.

From here Vico makes another audacious etymological jump that allows him to “close the loop,” so to speak, with Vergil rather than Homer:

§535. And Apollo and Diana are children of Latona, so called from *latere*, to hide (the sense which *condere* originally had in the phrases *condere gentes*, *condere regna*, *condere urbs* [*sic*]), whence in Italy the name of Latium. . . .

As a more forthcoming admission of the literary source of his philology in

§§532-535, Vico might simply have quoted the *Aeneid*, lines 1-6:

Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris
 Italiam, fato profugus, Laviniaque venit
 litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto
 vi superum saevae memorem Iunonis ob iram;
 multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem,
 inferretque deos Latio, genus unde Latinum

Vico not only lifts Vergil’s account of Italy’s foundation *mūthos* (substituting, Romulus for Aeneas), he copies Vergil’s very diction, whether consciously or not. (I suspect he senses the pressure of Vergil’s proem.) Never mind that the “true” origin of “Latona” is “Lato,” a Doric form of Leto, an etymology he either doesn’t know or suppresses for the sake of expediency.

As Book II moves along, Vico wields his instrument forged out of etymology and *mūthos* to construct the system which has prompted recent

scholars to lionize his originality. *Again, within this system Homer serves more as a corroborative authority than as the peripatetic cultural figure he will represent in Book III.* I have come across no extended section in the *Scienza Nuova* that better displays this function than the following paragraphs:

§539. . . . [W]hen the heroes had settled within circumscribed lands and when with the increase of their families the spontaneous fruits of nature were no longer sufficient, . . . they. . . set about the long, arduous, and heavy task of bringing their lands under cultivation and sowing them with grain, which, roasted among the thorns and briars [i.e., in natural forest fires], they had perhaps discovered to be useful for human nourishment. Hereupon, by a fine natural and necessary metaphor, they called the ears of grain golden apples, transferring the idea of the apples which are fruits of nature gathered in summer, to the ears of grain which human industry gathers likewise in summer. . . .

§540. From this labor, the greatest and most glorious of all, the *carattere* [mythic archetype] of Hercules sprang up, reflecting great glory on Juno [= Greek “Hera”] who set this task for the nourishment of the families.²⁹ And, in other metaphors both beautiful and

²⁹ In my estimation, this first sentence in §540 represents *conclusive proof* that Vico possessed a remarkably sound etymological knowledge of ancient Greek, demonstrating a confidence in the relationship between Greek and Latin that would allow him to carry forward his evolutionary historical exegesis (as Wilamowitz would later do) on the *verum-factum* of a Greco-Roman continuum. Vico’s wording here is crucial: “Hercules sprang up, reflecting great glory [It. ‘gloria’ = Gr. ‘kléos’] of Juno [Latin ‘Giunone’ = Greek ‘Hera’].” The phrase I have underlined proves that Vico, despite using Italian names for the deities of the Greco-Roman pantheon (i.e., “Ercole” and “Giunone”), understands fully the morphemic structure of “Herakles.” Support for Vico’s scholarship comes indirectly from Gregory Nagy himself, who in the manual for his Harvard course “Concepts of the Hero” observes:

necessary, they imagined the earth in the aspect of a great dragon, covered with scales and spines (the thorns and briars), bearing wings (for the lands belonged to the heroes), always awake and vigilant (thickly grown in every direction). This dragon they made the guardian of the golden apples in the garden of the Hesperides. Because of the wetness from the waters of the flood, the dragon was later believed to have been born in the water. Under another aspect they imagined [the earth as] a hydra (also from *hyddr*, "water"), which, when any of its heads were cut off, always grew others in their place. It was of three alternating colors: black (the burnt-over land), green (the leaf), and gold (the ripe grain). These are the three colors of the serpent's skin, which, when it grows old, is sloughed off for a fresh one. Finally, under the aspect of its fierceness in resisting cultivation, the earth was also imagined as a most powerful beast, the Nemean lion (whence later the name lion was given to the most powerful of the animals); which philologists hold to have been a monstrous serpent. All these beasts vomit forth fire, which is the fire set to the forests by Hercules.

§541 These three different stories, from three different parts of Greece, signify the same thing in substance. In another part of Greece another story grew up, telling of the child Hercules slaying the serpents while yet in his cradle; that is, in the infancy of the

The goddess of *hōra* (plural *hōrai*) was *Hêra* (the two forms *hōra* and *Hêra* are related to each other). She was the goddess of seasons, in charge of making everything happen on time, happen in season, happen in a timely way, etc. Herakles = *Hêrakilês* 'he who has the **kleos** of *Hêra*' [my emphasis]. As we saw in our previous discussion of the concept of the hero, the hero is one who has **kleos**. The **kleos** of Herakles comes from Hera, who is also his ritually antagonistic god.

In digressing more than once on this issue, I have been hoping to put to rest what I call the "semiotic of Vichian mediocrity," which, *inter alia*, interprets the fact that he uses the Italian names for the characters in Homer and other *loci classici* as implying that he had no Greek. Even given the caveat that Vico thought Latin evolved directly from Greek, I very much agree with Donald Phillip Verene that Vico's Greek was more than merely competent.

heroic age. In yet another, Bellerophon slays the monster called the Chimaera, having the tail of a serpent, the body of a goat (to signify the enforested earth), and the head of a lion belching flames. In Thebes it is Cadmus who slays the great dragon and sows his teeth. (By a fine metaphor they gave the name of serpents teeth to the curved pieces of hard wood which must have been used to plough the earth before the use of iron was discovered.) Cadmus himself becomes a serpent (the ancient Romans would have said *Cadmus fundus jactus est*), as we have indicated above and as we shall explain more fully later on, when we shall see that the serpents of Medusa's head and Mercury's staff signified the dominion of the lands. Hence land rent was called *ophelia* from *ophis* > "serpent," and was also called the tithe of Hercules. It is in this sense that we read in Homer of the soothsayer Calchas interpreting the action of the serpent in devouring the eight swallows and their mother as meaning that the land of Troy would fall under the dominion of the Greeks at the end of nine years; so that the Greeks, while fighting the Trojans, when a serpent is slain by an eagle in the air and falls among them in the midst of the battle, take it for a good augury in conformity with the soothsaying science of Calchas. Hence Proserpine, who was the same as Ceres, is depicted in sculpture as being borne off in a chariot drawn by serpents, and hence serpents so often appear on the coins of the Greek commonwealths.

Following Vico's paradigmatic tripartite movement from §539 through §541 reveals the both the Modernist structured reasoning of a scientist and the anti-Modernist, anti-Cartesian faith (Greek: *pístis*) in the *verum / factum* credibility of the various *auctoritates fabulosæ* that he "cherry-picked" from the Classical corpus to explicate an ancient Greco-Roman etiological *mūthos*.

Here is the way Vico proceeds: His initial interest is in determining the “cause”³⁰ of the *nazioni*, which he posits as the geopolitical establishment of “families” among the heroes (that is, “[W]hen the heroes had settled within circumscribed lands and when with the increase of their families the spontaneous fruits of nature were no longer sufficient, . . . they . . . set about the long, arduous, and heavy task of bringing their lands under cultivation”)³¹, an institution whose name Vico will shortly derive from *famuli*.³² An important

³⁰ Even this “scientific” objective originates in the *auctoritas* of antiquity. Hence, for example, in the *Iliad* we find the initiatory question at line 8, “Who among the gods caused [Achilles and Agamemnon] to conflict [xunēeke mákhesthai]?” In the *Aeneid*, Vergil supplicates the Muse in Scroll I, lines 8-11: “Muse, remember to me these causes [mihi causas memora]: which deity was offended,/ and why did the Queen of the gods compel/ a man so signal in virtue [*pietas*] to undergo so many reversals and come up against so many/ hardships?” And in the opening of the *Poetics*, Aristotle says: “Let us reason on the subject of what constitutes successful poetry, beginning, as is only natural, with first principles.” as Aristotle’s argument proceeds, we discover that among these principles is the need to determine the “causes” of *mímēsis*, which in the *Poetics* are psychologically rooted in child’s play. This aesthetic is quite prescient of modern theory. In *Homo Ludens*, for example, Jehan Huizinga labels the initiatory free play of the artist’s imagination (*fantasia*) with the Greek *paidiā*.

³¹ Notice that Vico’s sentence here takes the form of an enthymeme, which is considered a deductive argument based on probability, and thus rhetorically sound.

³² At §555 Vico makes this crucial linguistic cross-reference:

[F]rom the fame (*fama*) of the heroes (primarily acquired through the . . . two parts of the heroism of virtue and from the worldly renown which is the *klēos* or glory of the Greeks (called *fama* by the Latins and *phēme* too by the Greeks), the refugees were called *famuli*, and it was principally from these *famuli* that the families took their name.

thing to recognize about his premise in §539 is that its initial thrust is *anthropological / historical*, not *mythographic*. Vico wants his audience to accept it as empirically valid rather than as mere fable. Nonetheless, it clearly recalls the problem he introduced through *mūthos* back at §510—namely, that of addressing a shortage of females, at first through deceit resulting in rape (present, significantly, in all of the traditions he has emphasized), but gradually evolving into institutional *connubium*. With the resulting (biblically sanctioned) population explosion comes the *necessary* invention of agriculture. The universal success of this human technology in turn creates a source of life-sustaining nourishment: grain. As a symbol of both fecundity and of the material wealth of the landowners, the golden hue of the grain itself is “re-metaphorized” as the golden apple, whose symbolic meaning becomes divorced

...

Vico’s claim here of being able to extrapolate a social structure from etymologies is predicated on two errors—or “fantasies,” if you will. The first is to persist with his already established (but faulty) derivation associating epic glory with light rather than with epic song, the oral preservation of culture across generations. His second “mistake” is to associate epic heroes with virtue. This pairing applies reasonably enough to Vergil’s *pious Aeneas*, an emblematic protagonist obviously playing to Augustus’ own image of proper Roman “values.” It is thoroughly inconsistent, however, with even Vico’s own general labeling of the Homeric heroes as *volgari*. That Vico actually conflates “glory” and “virtue” at 555 is yet another manifestation of the “Greco-Roman” continuum, not to mention of the intervening Christian *ethos* within, e.g., Tasso and Ariosto.

from its immediate value when it becomes, e.g., a “first cause” of the Trojan War (one not mentioned in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*) or the prize in Atalanta’s race.

But in keeping with my claims about Vico’s fundamental ambivalence, a second look at these passages as I have placed them together presents quite a different perspective. If we allow §541 to overwhelm us by its length as compared to §539, then *mūthos* trumps science. Consider Vico’s scrupulous attention in §541 to mythographic detail, which he expresses characteristically as tripartite in nature. Playing to the hilt his self-appointed role as *filólogo*, Vico draws upon his encyclopedic study of the stories humanity tells of itself to show that the thematic connection between empirical wealth and fable applies across a range of individuated myths and Greco-Roman authorities. Notice Vico’s consistent, aggressive thesis that Greek cultural metaphors, as revealed by etymology, were quite seamlessly transposed into Roman ones. Interpolating the Kadmos *mūthos* expands the forms that land acquisition theme can assume, but it does not at all interfere with the continuum. Thus, though in §541 the Greek Kadmos is the nominal subject, Vico hastens to interpolate a Roman referent, *fundus factus est*, only then turning to *ōpheleia*. This pattern has the polemical effect of imparting a stamp of priority to *Italia*, which gives Vico’s overall rhetorical technique a clear affinity with Vergil’s Homeric Greece-to-Augustan

Rome comparison in the *Aeneid*. Vico never abandons this comparative technique.

Vico has incorporated apples and snakes into the complex, and he now adds another “golden” commodity. Referring back to the mythographic “fecundity-to-prize” transformation addressed in §539, he argues for a historical progression:

§545. Later, by a further extension of the idea of prizing and cherishing, they must have applied the term golden to fine wool. Hence in Homer Atreus complains that Thyestes has stolen his golden sheep [*Iliad* 2.106], and the Argonauts stole from Pontus the Golden Fleece. For this reason Homer gives his kings and heroes the fixed epithet *polymēlos*, rich in flocks [*Iliad* 2.605, 705; 14.490]; as the ancient Latins, by uniformity of ideas, called the patrimony *pecunia*, which the Latin grammarians derive from *pecus*, herd or flock. Among the ancient Germans, and Tacitus' account [*Germania* 5], the flocks and herds are their most highly prized [possessions], indeed their only wealth (*solae et gratissimae opes sunt*). This custom must also have prevailed among the ancient Romans, whose patrimony was *pecunia*, as the Law of the Twelve Tables attests in the article on testaments [5,3]. And *melon* means both apple and sheep to the Greeks, who, perhaps also under the aspect of precious fruit, called honey *melî*; and the Italians call apples *mele*.

The linkage of Homer as a historical authority to Roman civilization—through the medium of comparative philology—is as strong here as anywhere in the *Scienza Nuova*. Probably the most arresting phrase in the entire paragraph is “by uniformity of ideas”; this is an unambiguous marker of Vico’s conviction that it is both possible and illuminating to reconstruct a one-to-one correspondence between Greek and Roman cultural institutions. Moreover, he remains true to

his objective of applying the pattern very broadly to all of Europe: after having ignored temporarily the reference to Tacitus which sparked the *connubium* theme back at §507, here he reestablishes the triplet. Throwing in this succeeding “gentile” civilization gives the phrase “by uniformity of ideas” still more clout as a hermeneutic marker.

Vico’s next paragraph is the culmination of the paradigm I have been tracking in Book II:

§546. . . . Vergil must have had these golden apples in mind when, learned in heroic antiquities as he was, he extended the metaphor [of golden grain as metallic gold] and created the golden bough that Aeneas carries into the lower world [*Aeneid* 6.136ff]. . . . [M]etallic gold was more highly prized than iron in heroic times. Etearchus, for example, king of Ethiopia, replying to the ambassadors of Cambyses who had presented him with its many golden vessels in the name of their king, said that he could see no use for them and much less any need, must refusing them with a magnanimity that was quite natural [Herodotus 2.38; 3.20f]. Tacitus [*Gernania*, 5] relates the same of the ancient Germans, who in his time were just such ancient heroes as those of whom we are now speaking. . . . So in Homer [*Iliad*, 6.235f] we find the armories of the heroes stocked with arms of iron or gold indifferently, for the first world must have abounded in these minerals (as America was found to do on its discovery), which were later to be exhausted by human avarice.

Still hewing to the centrality of the Roman tradition, this passage presents Vergil as an “inter-textual” poet that very much suggests Richard Thomas’s portrait cited above. For Vico the countrified *vates* from Mantua was more than a poet in the “vulgar” Homeric sense; he was also an antiquarian scholar, acutely

conscious of what Walter Jackson Bate called “the burden of the past.” Close study of the *Aeneid* in particular bears Vico out: “beneath” this text lie not only Homer, but also the Alexandrian lyric poet Callimachus, the Epicurean philosopher-poet Lucretius, and other sophisticated models. But Vico does not stray far from his main interest of relating Vergil’s Golden Bough metaphor to the pan-European substitution of emblematic metals for agricultural abundance. His references to Herodotus and Tacitus do not seem “digressive” if we interpret them as reinforcing this historical element of his thesis. (On this issue, Vico is staring J.G. Frazier straight in the face.) Still, it comes as more than a mild surprise to find Vico at paragraph’s end taking his universalization principle to its inevitable conclusion by juxtaposing Homer with the discovery of America. This foreshadowing of manufactured nostalgia for the New World such as Châteaubriand’s (“pre-”) Romantic novella *Atala* (1800) imparts a hermetic seal to Vico’s paradigm.

§547. From all of this we derive this great corollary: the division of the ages of the world—that is, the ages of gold, silver, copper, and iron—was invented by the poets of degenerate times.³³ For it was this poetic gold,

³³ In *Works and Days* Hesiod actually describes five ages: the gold, silver and bronze ages of the titans and gods, followed by the age of heroes and the “present” iron age of humans. That each age represents a decline in Hesiod may have influenced Vico, who portrays the heroes of Homer as vulgar and violent, virtually unworthy of Homeric *kléos áfthiton*, “imperishable heroic song.”

Perhaps it is more than coincidence that Hesiod’s ratio of total ages to ages in which *athanatoi* (“deathless ones”) alone existed is 5:3, which produces a non-

namely, grain, that among the Greeks lent its name to the golden age, whose innocence was but the extreme savagery of the Cyclopes (in whom. . . Plato recognizes the first fathers of families), who lived separately and alone with their wives and children, never concerning themselves with one another's affairs, as Polyphemus tells Ulysses [*Odyssey* 9.112ff].

Here we find Vico daring to violate his tripartite obsession. He does so mainly in order to expand the paradigm to accommodate both his view of the *famuli* as the original structural unit of Roman (and so, eventually, of European) society. At the same time, this passage recalls—as I believe, deliberately—Hesiod's "five-age" pseudo-historical framework. Observe that the *imprimatur* Vico provides for this framework is the static, textual, *authoritative* Homer to which Plato is nearly always responding.

Finally, it is enlightening to contemplate Books II and III in tandem as an elaboration of a perspective which Vico conceived very early, and concerning which he was markedly consistent. For example, in the *Prima Scienza Nuova*

terminating number approximating 1.618. This is the famous "Golden Section" (legendarily discovered by the Pythagoreans) on which the visual harmony of so much Greco-Roman architecture and statuary is based. Today's trendy "fractal geometry" has demonstrated that this ratio generates the infinite "Fibonacci sequence," an aesthetically powerful *mise en abîme* that is quite compatible with Nagy's conception of *mimēsis* as self-generating and non-terminating.

(1725, the one he had sent to Newton with such high hopes), Vico establishes his typical hermeneutic triplet:

§287. . . . [W]e find all the other fables connected with the solemnity and sanctity of heroic marriage, in one of which Juno's anger with Jove led her to try to kill Hercules [*Ercole*] because he was Jove's unsightly bastard [i.e., Hephaistos/Vulcan], were [originally] fables about the great labours that Juno, the goddess of marriage, commanded the first fathers to undertake for the needs of families. But since none of the [corrupt] fables contain these [original] and appropriate meanings or allegories, they come to the obscene end in which Hercules, [originally] Ἥρας κλέος [*Hēras kleos*] "Juno's glory," he who overcomes everything through his virtue and with the help of Juno's favour, becomes, in fact, Juno's utter disgrace.

§288. With these shafts of illumination the fables are restored in love online their true light, through which three ages of heroic poets are distinguished. The first was an age of wholly severe poets, as is appropriate for the founders of nations. The second, which must then have grown gradually over many centuries, was at age of wholly corrupt poets. Both of these ages consisted of entire poetic or heroic nations. The third was at age in which individual poets collected the fables of these nations, i.e. their corrupt histories, from which they composed their poems. This is the age in which to place Homer, since we have shown that he was a historian, and in our view the first that we have, of the Greek nation.³⁴

These paragraphs are an "unpacked" prototype of the movement I have just discussed that takes place in the later editions from *mūthos*-based explications of the Greco-Roman continuum (circa 508ff.) toward Vico's contributions to the Homeric Question in Book III. Of particular interest is his choice of the

³⁴ *The First New Science*, translated and edited by Leon Pompa (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 2002), pp. 169-170. The interpolations "original" and "originally" are Pompa's.

Herakles *mūthos* as a “shaft of illumination.” Clearly, he is not only aware of its heavily ironic import, but he also knows the Greek etymology that forces the irony. His linguistic accuracy certainly mitigates the impression one might get from the literature that Vico’s knowledge of Antiquity comes from Latin sources only; and note how early this knowledge is manifested.³⁵ More important, I believe that Vico’s juxtaposition of Ἡρώς κλέος with Italian nominal forms is his metonymic *sēma* for the development of early European culture from *volgare* Hellenic institutions to more civil Roman ones.

As the characterization of Homer as a latecoming “historian” in 288 (following hard upon the Herakles *mūthos*) shows, the Kierkegaardian *muliggjøreelse* of the oral-evolutionary Homeric paradigm is present in this early version of Vico’s concept. Yet there are interesting differences from his later

³⁵ One can argue that Vico was even then “on the right etymological track” by comparing 287 with Nagy’s comments on the Herakles *mūthos*:

Herakles = Hêraklês 'he who has the kleos of Hêra'. As we saw in our previous discussion of the concept of the hero, the hero is one who has kleos. . . . The kleos of Herakles comes from Hera, who is also his ritually antagonistic god. . . . That Hera, who controls seasonality, is important for any hero can be seen in that the word meaning 'hero', hêrôs, is related to these two words hōra and Hêra. An important qualification: the hero is unseasonal during his/her lifetime. The precise moment when everything comes together for the hero is the moment of death. The hero is "on time" at the hōra or 'time' of death.

ideas. To begin with, he does not manifestly connect the “fables” with peripatetic “singing”; instead, he is emphasizing that they have come down through the European tradition in static form. The only indication that he might be thinking that of them as orally transmitted is that he claims they can only be understood properly when the historical circumstances behind their preservation are “restored.” As a contrast, consider his later unambiguous formulation, which I placed on my title page: “Homer was one of a number of rhapsodes . . . who relied upon memory, . . . going about singing the poems . . . throughout the cities of Greece, . . . because they were the segment of the people that had composed their histories.”

In 1725, Vico’s epithet for the first poets is “severe.” I surmise that these are the “theological poets” (as in Book III, 905) of the later editions. Another signal word is “corrupt,” a term normally associated with the written rather than the oral. This is striking because Vico states that the corruption was not an *event* but a *process* which took place “gradually over many centuries” (cf. Herakleitos, Schopenhauer, *et al.*). Hence one can assume that he means that corruption is the inevitable result of a transition from the oral to the written, somewhat resembling the later periods of Nagy’s model. This extrapolation is supported by Vico’s next arresting idea that eventually “individual poets collected” the pieces remaining from the process and “composed” (from the Latin

compōnō, “put together”) new, fully integrated poems which served not merely as entertainment but as a means of retaining cultural Memory for an entire people.

9. BOOKS IV AND V: THE *AUCTORITAS* OF THE *RAPSÒDI* FADES

Earlier I cited §915 from the Introduction to Book IV as an epitome of the *Scienza nuova's* grand design. With explicit reference to Vico's tripartite scheme as it appears there, I shall now consider several passages from Books IV and V. These entries reflect a pattern within this larger scheme that runs as follows. Vico creates triads which purport to explain the rise of law as a foundational vehicle for moving away from the barbarity of the age of the "theological poets, who were themselves heroes and sang true and austere fables" (Book III, §905).¹ Though I believe that Vico thinks of himself as arguing for the development of legal institutions in Europe generally, his "evidence" comes from his native Italy. Owing to this centripetal interest, Vico arranges the Greece → Rome sequence such that Italy represents the formally developed institution and Greece becomes relegated to being an indicator. (An analogy that is not that eccentric is the relationship between Christ and John the Baptist.) My first tripartite example is from Section VII, "Three Kinds of Jurisprudence":

§938. The first was a divine **wisdom** called mystic theology, which means the science of divine speech or the understanding of the divine mysteries of divination. This science [*scienza!*] of auspicial

¹ Contrary to some critical opinion, these are not proto-Hegelian triads; they generally do not involve upward movement to an implicitly superior form (*Aufhebung*, "dialectic").

divinity was the vulgar [*volgare*, “of the common folk”; hence “preliterate”] wisdom whose sages were the theological poets of the *gentile* [cf. Descartes’ *païen*, “pagan”] world. From this mystic theology they were called *mystai*, or mystics, which the well-informed Horace translates as interpreters of the gods. . . .

§939. The second was the heroic jurisprudence, taking precautions by the use of certain proper words. Such is the wisdom of Ulysses, who speaks so adroitly in Homer that he obtains the advantages he seeks while always observing the propriety of his words. Hence all the reputation of the ancient Roman jurisconsults rested in their *cavere*, their taking care or making sure; and their *de iure respondere* was nothing but cautioning clients who had to present their cases in court to set forth the facts to the praetor with such circumstances that the formulae for action would be satisfied and the praetor would be unable to withhold them.

§940. The third is human jurisprudence, which looks to the truth of the facts themselves and benignly bends the rule of law to all the requirements

§938 seems initially to be referring to the age of the Homeric bards as Vico envisions it in Book III. But his laudatory citation of Horace suggests that in Book IV Vico’s perspective is being skewed back in the direction it took in Book II, that is, toward “Poetic Wisdom” as providing a historical record of Archaic *Roman* institutional models. Vico’s source is the “well-informed” Horace’s Second Book of Epistles, Epistle 1. Perhaps the core line of this poem containing the “information” to which Vico refers is in Horace’s line 138:

carmine di superi placantur, carmine Manes

(“By song may the gods on high be placated [*placantur*], by song may the native domestic spirits be pleased [*placantur*].” My translation)

Significantly given Vico's perspective, while *di superi* can refer to Greek and Roman deities generically, *Manes* are exclusively Italian. Immediately following this supplication, Horace launches into an encomiastic tableau of those "blessed original tough Roman farmers" (*agricolæ prisci fortes . . . beati*) struggling heroically, together with their wives and slaves, to found Roman agriculture. The epistle as a whole addresses Augustus as embodying the glorious history of how Rome improved upon Hellenic paradigms. Horace's lines put one in mind of Vergil's more famous ones, *Aeneid* 1.1-6, which zero in on the possibly the most important cultural deed Augustus' ancestor Aeneas accomplished. The reader will please indulge me here in my trite incidental Homer-Vergil comparison:

Arma virumque cano Troiae qui primus ab oris,
Arms and the man I sing who first from the shores of Troy

Italiam fato profugus, Laviniaque venit
(driven toward Italy by Fate) and to Lavinia's

litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto
litoral came. He was greatly tossed about [cf. *polútropos* Odysseus]
on land and sea

vi superum saevae memorem Iunonis ob iram;
by force of the gods above, by savage Juno's unforgetting ire.

multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem,
And also he suffered the many trials of war, until at last he could
found a city,

inferretque deos Latio

and carry [the native Trojan] gods into Latium
 (My translation)

Similarities in both theme and diction are unmistakable. Essentially, Horace does poetically for the Roman “backbone” farmer what Vergil does for the “sparing and pacifying” Roman soldier-hero.

Another good example of Vico’s availing himself of a cultural triplet to explain the development of a modern European institution occurs in Chapter II of Book IV, “Corollary on Duels and Reprisals.” The pattern of his argument is particularly interesting because he operates somewhat in reverse. The Greco-Roman continuum is very much present, but is veiled by Vico’s actual priority of establishing himself as an authority on the historical basis for the modern state-of-affairs in aspects of European jurisprudence. An example of this rhetorical pattern can be found at a cluster of paragraphs:

§961. . . . [D]uels contained real judgments, which, because they took place *in re praesenti*, in the presence of the disputed object, had no need of . . . formal denunciation. From these developed the *vindiciae*, in which a clod taken from the wrongful possessor with a feigned show of force, which Aulus Gellius calls *festucaria* of straw (but the name *vindiciae* must have come from the real force originally used), was taken to the judge, before whom the claimant spoke over the *gleba*, or clod, the words: *Aio hunc fundum meum esse ex iure quiritorium* (“I declared this farm to be mine by the law of the Quirites”). Hence those who write that duels were introduced for lack of proofs are wrong; they should say rather for lack of judiciary laws. For certainly Frotho, king of Denmark, ordered that all disputes should be settled by duels, thereby forbidding their settlement by legitimate judgments. And to avoid litigation, the

laws of the Lombards, Salians, Englishman, Burgundians, Normans, Danes, and Germans are all alike full of duels

This passage initiates a characteristic Vichian thought-pattern. He is attempting to bring to light the historical origins of a general aspect of property law by tracing it back to the evidence of one very specific, archaic manner of resolving disputes that he knows might well seem far-fetched (and thus alluring) to his putative audience: the duel. In other words, he is moving from the simple—alternatively, the *gentile* (“pagan”)—to the complex, or the modern European juridical mechanism for dispute resolution. While it is disingenuous to argue for a direct connection between this scenario and the reference at §938 to “the well-informed Horace,” I feel that it is quite significant that Vico has “planted” the sturdy foundational Horatian farmer in our minds long before §961. Such an interpretation explains his etymologically driven chain of logic from *vindiciae* construed as a barbaric display of brute force, to a symbolic cultural remembrance, to a formal recorded law. References to the “clod” and the “farm” are there to lubricate, as it were, this progression. Then, in accordance with Vico’s habitual dependence on the Classical corpus, he displays his knowledge of Aulus Gellius (ca. 125-180), the grammarian, rhetorician and jurist whose voluminous *Noctæ Atticæ* is just the sort of repository of quasi-historical and linguistic miscellanies that would have appeal to him as legitimate “empirical” evidence. And the most important progression comes almost as a

surprise at paragraph's end; Vico extrapolates from early Roman law to medieval Europe.

Paragraph 961, however, merely sets things up. Effectively, the certification of Vico's entire system comes two paragraphs later:

§963. . . . [T]here are two great vestiges of such duels, one from Greek and one from Roman history, showing that the peoples must have begun their wars (called *duella* by the ancient Latins), with combats between the offended individuals, even if they were kings, waged in the presence of their respective peoples, who wish to publicly to defend or avenge their offenses. In this fashion certainly the Trojan War began with the combat of Menelaus and Paris (the former the wronged husband and the latter the seducer of his wife, Helen); and when the duel was indecisive the Greeks and Trojans proceeded to wage war with each other. And we have already noted the same custom among the Latin nations in the war between the Romans and the Albans, which was effectively settled by the combat between the three Horatii and the three Curiati, one of whom must have abducted Horatia. In such armed judgments right was measured by the fortune of victory. This was the counsel of divine providence, to the end that, among barbarous peoples with little capacity for reason and no understanding of right, wars might not breed further wars, and that they might must have some notion of the justice or injustice of men from the favor or disfavor of the gods: even as the Gentiles² scorned the saintly Job when he had fallen from his royal estate because God was against him. And on the same principle in the returned barbarian times the barbarous custom was to cut off the hand of the loser, however just his cause.

² Bergin and Fisch have this word in lower case here. I argue that in this context (that is, in the truly biblical sense referring to very ancient peoples who were not Hebrews, yet who lived in proximity to them), the more conventional capitalized form is closer to what Vico means. This particular use of *gentili* here thus obviously differs from Vico's general hermeneutics associating them with the "pagan" Roman *gentes*. See again Appendix One.

I call special attention to this paragraph because it contains in microcosm *sēmai* of virtually every aspect of Vico's system which I have highlighted. What stands out immediately in §963 is that Vico is so palpably keen to marshal the Greco-Roman continuum to his purpose. Clearly he believes he has already established in his previous argument that, from the standpoint of the would-be early eighteenth-century European jurisprudential philosopher on his major covert models Grotius and Pufendorf, Roman methods of doing things in general are best understood as developments from, yet obvious improvements over, ancient Greek prototypes. By now, his readers should also have realized that his dependence on the idea of a continuum is more complex than a flamboyant proto-Romantic application of *fantasia* to approximate Newtonian "black-box" empiricism. Upon this inventive *modus* we can graft the fact that in Book II Vico has repeatedly used strategies designed to foster an acceptance of the continuum as a matter of fragrantly unscientific *auctoritas*. This ambiguity explains how Vico is able to resort here in Book IV at §963 to the Classical corpus for evidence of the origins of dispute resolution.

The pattern of Vico's argument is interesting. His priority is definitely in the Roman direction. This fresh implementation of *hysteron proteron*—again, the inversion of chronological order (often used almost disingenuously, as in this case, to promote a handy impression of hierarchy rather than prove a true

historical parallel) allows him to implement his characteristic dependence on etymology (see above, p.173). Vico expects his audience to accept on good faith that the word *duella* did indeed originally stand for “war.” With this as a “datum,” Vico can now generate a tableau in which we see *gentile* wars as (in the beginning) little more than vendettas “between . . . offended individuals,” as he says. But even though he stamps this ancient practice with a Latin semiotic, his primary evidence comes out of the Trojan war. The curiosity which is most valuable to observe here is how quickly Vico skips over the most hermeneutically powerful aspect of the Menelaus-Paris *duella*, which is that, to invoke William James once again (this time in a *reductio ad absurdum*), “It didn’t work, so it wasn’t true.” In other words, as a metonymic *agon* for a Panhellenic *pólemos*, ultimately even this preliminary, controlled, surprisingly rational attempt at dispute resolution failed. In gliding over the context of the duel itself, Vico demonstrates how ready he is in Book IV to avail himself of *auctoritas*-Homer, and so cause this figure to supplant³ *oidós/rhapsoidós*-Homer. In the *Iliad*, Scroll III, where the aborted duel occurs, the poet reiterates at several places

³ I wish to gloss my diction here by juxtaposing the Hegelian word *aufheben*, which simultaneously indicates “preserve,” “elevate,” and “delete.” I am firmly convinced that this instability explicates Vico’s Homer, though I have struggled to put into words exactly how. Perhaps a good way of expressing his perspective is to say that Vico needs both the preliterate diachrony and the quasi-empirical literary synchrony for his *scienza* to come out right.

that the two sides were really hoping that the *agon* would settle things once and for all so that no mass-conflict would be necessary. But when it seems clear that Paris is going to lose against Menelaus' head-long rush, Venus/Aphrodite (the order of my referent here reflecting Vico's rhetorical purpose) sweeps Paris off the scene. The overriding importance of this turn of events is that it is a mandatory sustaining element of the song itself. Yet it provides Vico with a chance to move from a barbaric origin to an institution. Note well, however, that to cause this instance of the pre-jurisprudential *duella* to support his paradigm, Vico craftily leaves out Venus' intervention completely and simply calls the encounter "indecisive."

As Vico progresses toward his ultimate goal of accounting for the development of modern European institutions, "Homer" disappears entirely, to be replaced by "his" Roman descendants. A good example comes very late:

§1004. All that we have had to say in this [fourth] book is so much evidence to prove that in the course of the entire lifetime of nations they follow this order through three kinds of commonwealths or civil constitutions, and no more. They all have their roots in the first, which were the divine administrations, and from this beginning all nations (by the axioms above posited as principles of the ideal eternal history) must proceed through this sequence of human institutions: first becoming commonwealths of optimates, later free popular commonwealths, and finally monarchies. Hence Tacitus, though he does not see them in this order, affirms (as we pointed out in the Idea of the Work) that outside of these three forms of public constitutions, ordained by the nature of peoples [*le genti*], the others compounded of these three by human design are more to be desired of heaven than ever to be obtained by effort, and if by

chance any such exist they are not enduring. But, to leave no point of doubt concerning this natural succession of political or civil constitutions, we shall find that the succession admits of natural mixtures, not of form with form (for such mixtures would be monsters), but how they succeeding form with a preceding administration. Such mixtures are founded on the axiom that when men change they retain for some time the impression of their previous customs.

Vico retains several themes he established at the beginning. He still uses Cartesian geometrical response-language like “prove” and “axioms.” The tripartite succession of institutions still dominates his structural analysis. He makes the point that the succession is orderly and consistent rather than heterogeneous and thus “monstrous”—while allowing, as hermeneuticists worth their salt should, for reasonable lag-time as the various components of an *epistēmē* catch up with each other. From this paragraph onward, demonstrating a natural institutional succession that *begins* with the Homeric Greeks and *ends* with the Romans no longer forms part of Vico’s paradigm. Tacitus alone carries his audience quite adequately from the Ancients to the Moderns. Essentially, Homer has served “his” purpose. Book III has described a pragmatic model of succession that accounts for the preliterate tradition, while Books IV and V respect the “historical” Greco-Roman continuum of *auctoritas* reflected outside Homer.

10. VICO'S "PRE-ROMANTIC" HOMER

There is an aesthetic problem that arises out of Vico's need, as I have portrayed it, to distance himself from The Quarrel. Harold Bloom coincidentally elicits the problem in defining *clinamen*, when he claims that "poets, by the time they have grown strong, cannot read the poetry of X, for really strong poets can read only themselves." (*The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 19). This proposition is indebted in part to Bloom's assimilation of Vico's motto, formulated in his propaedeutic work *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia ex linguae originibus eruenda libri tres* as *verum factum est*, "The norm[ative essence] of the true is to have made it" or, alternatively "the true is what has been made [i.e., in human communities]."⁴ Slightly earlier, Vico states the principle as *verum et factum convertuntur*: "For the Latins, *verum* (the true) and *factum* (the made) are interchangeable, or to use the customary language of the Schools, they are

⁴ *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians, Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language*, L.M. Palmer, translator (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press, 1988), p. 52. Against those who see Vico as "anti-Modernist" on the grounds that he champions philology / history over Cartesian *a priori* epistemology, I point to the undeniable similarity of spirit between *verum factum est* and William James's "The Truth is what works." Note also that Vico's Jamesian "maker's knowledge" is what he means by *sapienza*. For a similar view, see Max Harold Fisch, "Vico and Pragmatism," in *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*, eds. Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Haydon White (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 401-424.

convertible.” (, p. 47). I say “propaedeutic” because, although the *Antiquissima* represents Vico’s formal empiricist epistemological (or, to use Palmer’s quasi-Foucaultian word, “epistemic”) response to the Cartesian *a priori*, Vico culls his “data” from many sources he would later use in the *Scienza nuova*—most prominently, Cicero and Tacitus, and Livy.

Bloom’s acknowledgment of Vico’s influence on own his theories moves one to ask what the “truest” model for *poiēsis* (here, “verse-making”) is. From the perspective of Vico’s Homer theory, especially as it anticipates current oral-evolutionary hypotheses, the paradox of Bloom’s “strong poet” can be put thus: If each instance of “strong poetry” is unique because it can only be “made” (cf. Greek *pōiein*) by the blessedly rare individuated genius, how is it that “Homer,” the “strongest” poet of all, indeed by overwhelming consensus the originator of all strong poetry in Bloom’s Western Canon, was no single proto-Shakespearean “bard” at all, but rather the surviving phenomenal *télos* of an untold number of successive re-enactments (*mímēsēs*)? In other words, the “oral-evolutionary model” for the Homeric corpus mitigates Bloom’s theory because by implication it actually opposes the image of an individuated poetic mind creating an entire masterpiece.⁵ Milton—not Homer—is Bloom’s archetypal “strong poet.” His case

⁵ In this vein, some scholars have objected that the research of Parry and Lord does not explain the sweep and sheer *length* of Homeric epic. Against this objection, Lord, in *The Singer of Tales*, cites, *inter alia*, the marathon performances of Avdo Međedonović. Such performances using memory and Nagy’s “re-composition” also

is all the more compelling because, since he was an individuated, empirically blind poetic genius, he actually did reenact the Homeric *persona* of the “Ancients and Moderns” controversy. In this case, innumerable “Homers” have not precluded the legendary single genius we call “Homer”; rather, they have made “him” possible.

The *literatur'nost'*, the “New Critical” unity of Homer’s poems as a *counter-indication*⁶ of an oral-evolutionary tradition, is a problem that modern translators have felt obligated to address. For example, in his introduction to his masterful *Iliad* translation, under the subtitle “The Unity of Homer,” Richmond Lattimore takes this position:

And did he write both the Iliad and the Odyssey? That is not a soluble problem and it is not, to me, a very interesting one; it is the work, not the man or men who composed the work, which is interesting. But Greek tradition down to the time of the Alexandrians is unanimously in favor of single authorship. If somebody not Homer wrote the Odyssey, nobody had a name to give him. Later authors quote Homer constantly; other poems of the [Epic] Cycle are less well known. *They* may be attributed to Homer; but not vice versa. The special position of Iliad and Odyssey, under the name of Homer, in Greek tradition, puts the burden of proof on those who would establish separate authorship, and I have not encountered any arguments strong enough to alter that situation.⁷

take place in Central Asia.

⁶ I use this word rather than, *e.g.*, “counter-balance” to reflect that the unified “Homer” tends to overwhelm the oral-evolutionary model cognitively.

⁷ *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 29.

Lattimore's brief appraisal of the unity issue is surprising, given that he is aware of the Parry-Lord Hypothesis. When he says that determining a single authorship for the two epics "is not a soluble problem and it is not . . . a very interesting one," he seems to me to have chosen the wrong conundrum.

"Solubility" in the oral-evolutionary model could only apply to problems like "When was it first assumed that some person or persons actually composed both epics?" Nagy, for instance, dates this "definitive period" at the legendary "Peisistratean recension," but specifically not before then. In fact, so does Horace in the *Ars Poetica*, in his literary way. That a Modern is essentially in agreement at the most generalized level with an Ancient lends considerable credibility to this aspect of the Unitarian position—if, that is, one concedes that unity is the intended of a late "fixed" performance given under the aegis of State interests. Ergo, problem solved, nominally. On the other hand, against Lattimore's dismissal, it is indeed quite "interesting" to determine whether fixing a single authorship is a valid objective in the first place.

Lattimore is not the only modern translator to have pushed the Unitarian position for the sake of *literatur'nost'*. In his introduction to his revision of the *Loeb Classical Library* translation, George F. Dimock writes:

Whether the same poet produced the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* remains a disputed question. Separate authorship for the *Odyssey* has by no means been proved, however, and until it is we would do well to

follow the practice of the centuries and think of a single poet named Homer as the author of both epics.⁸

Dimock's claim, associated as it is with a 1995 revision, frankly astounds one. It is retrograde to all images of Homer that posit a single genius. Consciously or not, he seems to be rejecting the entire thrust of the modern oral-evolutionary paradigm. Today, one of the chief sources of excitement about "Homer" is that there is general scholarly agreement that the name patently does *not* represent "a single poet . . . [who is] the author of both epics." Listing all of the reasons why Dimock's statement is misleading would require a lengthy bibliography. A mere sample of intervening facts supporting my point here comprises data such as that (a) there are statistical differences in the dialect distribution within the individual epics; (b) the *Odyssey* is substantially shorter; and (c) the *Odyssey's* epic similes are consistently both less abundant and less elaborate than those of the *Iliad*. What might Dimock's motive be? May I suggest that a translator is expected to produce a text that minimizes diachronic inconsistencies. Dimock's appeal to his audience to assume synchrony, in the face of the diachrony of the tradition, amounts to a proffered contract arising from the principle of compromise that translation entails. It belatedly accounts for the *agon* between Pope and Bentley.

⁸ P. 2.

Vico, by contrast, stresses the abundant evidence against Homer's being an individuated genius like Vergil or Dante. Once again I cite his acknowledgment of Homer's supposed deficiencies in the *Scienza Nuova*, paragraph 881: the "base sentences,. . . vulgar customs,. . . crude comparisons,. . . local idioms,. . . licenses in meter,. . . variations in dialect," all of which he attributes to the rhapsodes (read "the *aoidoi*") having become "lost in the crowd of Greek peoples." Today one would likely add more linguistic evidence like the repetition of formulas and the incongruous appearance of the dual verb-form at in Scroll Nine (the Embassy of *three* Achaeans—Agamemnon, Odysseus, and Phoinix—to Achilles) in the *Iliad* to Vico's list. Ironically, Vico's *point de repère* is right before us. All of these details are inimical to the developing Romantic concept of poetic genius, which is (maybe paradoxically, given the empirical perspectives of, e.g., Vico in Book III and Herder) as anti-collective as one can imagine. Traditionally, this heterogeneity has been associated with the *libros confusos* interpretation of the Separatists / Analysts. But their position is essentially a literary one. They see themselves as "taking apart" (Greek *analúō*) disparate written components that have accrued over the centuries. By contrast, Vico tries to move from to *eidōs* (in Aristotle, "specific form or species") to *gēnos* (genus or family). Thus in the *Scienza Nuova* "Homer" is simultaneously the *sēma* of a pan-European tradition of wandering bards at country fairs (belatedly reified in the "Rinaldi" singers),

and a linguistic authority invaluable for tracing the origins of ancient institutions as a whole.

The major conclusion one must draw is that Vico's precursor of the Parry-Lord-Nagy Hypothesis is not actually sympathetic to the ground *mūthos* of later Romantic aesthetics, because, notwithstanding the prominence of *fantasia* in his theories of acculturation, Vico avoids portraying "Homer" as a genius. To emphasize the importance of this distinction, I turn once again to Harold Bloom.

As I have said, oral-evolutionary Homeric paradigms, and the "blind singer" *mūthos* that accompanies them, are curiously pernicious to Bloom's influence theory, especially where he aligns himself with Derrida. In *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom asserts:

Jacques Derrida[s] . . . deconstructive enterprise questions the "logocentric enclosure" and seeks to demonstrate that the spoken word is less primal than writing is. Writing, in Derrida's vision, is what makes memory possible, in the sense that memory enables the continuance of thought, allows thought a subject matter. (p. 43)

Most current ethnographic models reverse Bloom's principle, at least as he ascribes it to Derrida. The paradigm for both Hellenic and South Slavic oral epic flagrantly makes the spoken (recited) word more "primal" than the written one. The guiding *mūthos* behind Homeric epic is that the bard "receives" the hexameters rather than memorizing them from a text, with the understanding that each performance offers an opportunity to create, as well. Let it be said

that anthropology has actually supported this *mūthos*. A.B. Lord, for example, makes this generalization about performance in the South Slavic song culture:

[W]hen writing is introduced and begins to be used for the same purposes as the oral narrative song, when it is employed for telling stories and is widespread enough to find an audience capable of reading, this audience seeks its entertainment and instruction in books rather than in the living songs of men, and the older art gradually disappears. (*Singer*, p. 20)

It is intriguing that the “pre-Romantic” Jean-Jacques Rousseau states the same principle almost as if it were a matter of pure logic in Chapter Six of his unfinished 1755 *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, published posthumously in 1781: “Si l'Illiade eût été écrite, elle eût été beaucoup moins chantée, les rapsodes eussent été moins recherchés et se seraient moins multipliés.” (“If the *Iliad* had been written down, it would have been sung much less, the rhapsodes would have been less ‘popular’⁹ and [hence] would have been less in abundance.” [my translation]) We are on the verge of crediting Rousseau with a stunning insight that would later be validated empirically by Parry and especially Lord; then we read the social philosopher’s next sentence: “Aucun autre poëte n'a été ainsi

⁹ I use this word to translate “recherchés” in order to argue for an affinity with Vico’s use of *volgare*. Yet Rousseau’s own usage can in this case be rendered most authentically as “sought after,” which “points to” (cf. Greek *sēmainō*) Vico’s chapter title “In Search of the True Homer,” as well as his empirical reference to the “Rinaldi” singers. Note that, in consonance with both Wimsatt and Beardsley and Deconstructionist theory, I am not proposing a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* connection between the two usages.

chanté, si ce n'est le Tasse à Venise, encore n'est-ce que par les gondoliers, qui ne sont pas grands lecteurs.” (“No other poet has been sung this way, unless it is Tasso in Venice, and even this is only by the gondoliers, who are not great readers.” [my translation]) This second observation seems to undermine the first, since it cites a literary poet being sung by illiterates. The question Rousseau begs here is, “How could the literary Tasso have been disseminated as oral poetry?” My answer is: according to a process similar to that operating in Nagy’s Period 3, when the use of transcripts at Athens was a *sēma* of a replacement of the *aoidós* by the *rhapsoidós*. Nagy specifically defines the process as follows:

[A]ny written text that derives from an oral tradition can continue to enjoy the status of a recomposition-in-performance—so long as the oral tradition retains its performative authority. (*Homeric Questions*, pp. 69-70)

If one interprets liberally the phrase “that derives from an oral tradition,” Nagy’s principle applies quite well to the gondoliers’ Tasso; for it is highly unlikely that they did not practice at least a modicum of “recomposition-in-performance.” Furthermore, Rousseau’s citation of the gondoliers reflects the same impulse to provide a quick instance of a quasi-Homeric figure—flowing out of Greco-Roman *auctoritas*—as does Vico’s example of the “Rinaldi” singers. Both are moving toward positing a multiplicity of Homers in preliterate Greece.

Thus there is a real sense in which writing does not “make memory possible,” as Bloom says Derrida postulates. Within the dichotomy between oral

and written traditions, writing as transmitting code (*cf.* Wordsworth's phrase in the "Advertisement" to the *Lyrical Ballads*: "codes of decision") actually makes memory dispensable, despite what it may seem to do. To offer a case at the simplest possible level, why try to remember names and phone numbers when you can keep an address-book? The object of writing things down is not really to remember, but rather "not to forget." My most esteemed colleague on this point is none other than Plato; I quote Socrates again in the *Phaedrus*:

This [*tekhne* of the] alphabet, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is a specific both for the memory and for the wit. Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. [my emphasis]

From the viewpoint of challenging Bloom's acceptance of writing as primal over the oral in poetry, this distinction allows one to suggest a reversal of Derrida's "writerly" position that is quite congenial to Vico. Patrick H. Hutton has recognized the consistent theoretical deference Vico shows toward oral transmission. Citing *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, Hutton contends that Vico "worried . . . that the ready access to books might lead to a neglect of the training of memory, an exercise he judged indispensable for the development of

the imagination.” (p. 4.) Hutton firmly establishes that Vico applies this “oral → written” paradigm uniformly. Nonetheless, Vico’s insight, though pointing in the direction of Newtonian observational technique, is still essentially *a priori*. A.B. Lord’s empirical comment about the connection between the availability of books and loss of audience for the oral art vindicates his “worry” by induction two centuries later.

Outside of a Vichian context, Nagy has framed much the same issue through etymology, as a kind of {p, ~p} set in which the proposition and the negation of its opposite are not actually identical, though they may seem so:

The root for “forget” is *leth-* (*lethanei* [*Odyssey*] vii 221), the functional opposite of *mne-* “remember, have in mind,” a root that can also mean “have the mnemonic powers of a poet” in the diction of archaic poetry. Mnemosune “Memory”, mother of the Muses (*Theogony* 54, 135, 915), is the very incarnation of such powers. The conventional designation of poetic powers by *mne-* has been documented by Marcel Détiénne, who also shows that the word *a-leth-es* “true” is thus originally a double-negative expression of truth [as in “not unmindful of the truth”] by way of poetry. The wanderers [cf. *Scienza Nuova*, Book III] who are described in . . . [the *Theogony*] as being unwilling to tell the truth, *alethea muthesasthai*, are cast in the mold of an oral poet who compromises poetic truth for the sake of his own survival.¹⁰

Hesiod is fairly clearly pointing to an issue of authenticity, which Nagy’s phrase “for the sake of his own survival” exposes. Hesiod’s “wanderers,” who in the

¹⁰ *Greek Mythology and Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 44-46.

present context call to mind Vico's own image in Book III of itinerant bards, just do not have the patina of truthfulness that the (only slightly) earlier Homeric performers had. If we now move diachronically under this principle, we encounter an evolved, more extreme, "rhapsodic" version of this "true/not false" pairing being explored by the Platonic Socrates. Consider the irony in his flattery in the *Ion*:

I often envy the profession of a rhapsode, Ion; for you have always to wear fine clothes, and to look as beautiful as you can is a part of your art. Then, again, you are obliged to be continually in the company of many good poets; and especially of Homer, who is the best and most divine of them; and to understand him, and not merely learn his words by rote, is a thing greatly to be envied. And no man can be a rhapsode who does not understand the meaning of the poet. For the rhapsode ought to interpret the mind of the poet to his hearers, but how can he interpret him well unless he knows what he means? All this is greatly to be envied. (Jowett translation)

Under the more-than-faintly sarcastic "third-degree glare" of the Socratic *elenchos* (cross-examination) we the audience eventually discover that Ion actually *has* memorized Homer, a performative act which does not at all require a maker's understanding. Ion's pride in memorization is ironic for Plato because the rhapsode's function does not entail comprehension of his material. Over and over again in his dialogues, Plato, using Socratic irony, begins his arguments against the pernicious nature of second-hand, i.e., "rhetorical, Sophistic" knowledge by providing quasi-exhaustive lists of professions that require "real" practical knowledge. Here is a superb example from the *Republic*, Book I:

SOCRATES: Simonides, then, after the manner of poets, would seem to have spoken darkly of the nature of Justice; for he really meant to say that Justice is the giving to each man what is proper to him, and this he termed a debt.

POLEMARKHOS: That must have been his meaning.

S: By Zeus! And if we asked him what due or proper thing is given by medicine, and to whom, what answer do you think that he would make to us?

P: He would surely reply that medicine gives drugs and meat and drink to human bodies.

S: And what due or proper thing is given by pastry-making, and to what?

P: Seasoning to food.

S: And what is that which Justice gives, and to whom?

P: If, Socrates, we are to be guided at all by the analogy of the preceding instances, then Justice is the art which gives good to friends and evil to enemies.

S: That is his meaning then?

P: I think so.

S: And who is best able to do good to his friends and evil to his enemies in time of sickness?

P: The physician.

S: Or when they are on a voyage, amid the perils of the sea?

P: The pilot.

S: And in what sort of actions or with a view to what result is the just man most able to do harm to his enemy and good to his

friends?

P: In going to war against the one and in making alliances with the other.

S: But when a man is well, my dear Polemarkhos, there is no need of a physician?

P: No.

S: And he who is not on a voyage has no need of a pilot?

P: No.

S: Then in time of peace justice will be of no use?

P: I am very far from thinking so.

S: You think that Justice may be of use in peace as well as in war?

P: Yes.

S: Like husbandry for the acquisition of corn?

P: Yes.

S: Or like shoemaking for the acquisition of shoes—that is what you mean?

P: Yes.

S: And what similar use or power of acquisition has justice in time of peace?

P: In contracts, Socrates, justice is of use.

S: And by contracts you mean partnerships?

P: Exactly. . . .

(After Jowett)

And so forth. I have quoted at length in order to give some flavor of the usual “method” Plato’s Socrates so enjoys going through. I have underlined the specific crafts (*tekhnai*) he enumerates to show that his dialectic is essentially accretive. Socrates has once again “trotted out” his favorite examples of technologies (*tekhnai*) based on specific knowledge, such as how to make shoes and ships, which Plato means his audience to grasp immediately as successful because they do not rely on opinion (*dóxa*). I also underline the initiatory phrase “after all manner of poets,” which is an “indirect communication” (to use Kierkegaard’s approving epitome of “The Socratic Method” from *The Concept of Irony*) that Simonides’ poetry contrasts negatively with the ensuing catalogue of technologies both providing and requiring legitimate “hands-on” *epístēmē* (cf. Foucault and Wittgenstein, as I interject their core ideas above).

There are two things to notice about Plato’s message here that are pertinent to my overall argument. First, observe how a quasi-Socratic *élenkhos* both originates from and drives toward the Vichian idea that *verum factum est*. Second, Socrates’ attempt to move his audience away from the common assumption that Justice is little more than a matter of self-interest by marshaling numerous counter-examples patently foreshadows Thomas Kuhn’s concept of “paradigm shift.” That is to say, when the paradigm for Justice that Polemarkhos

originally accepts of “helping one’s friends and harming one’s enemies” is tested against the criterion of specific empirical knowledge which Socrates establishes in his methodically presented laundry-list of fields requiring *bona fide* expertise, even Polémarkhos himself eventually agrees that the “helping/harming” definition of Justice fails. In the midst of this process, Polémarchos betrays a subtle misprision. After Socrates has already listed several *tekhnai* to counterbalance the *auctoritas* of Simonides, Polémarkhos believes he has understood Socrates point, assuming that the old philosopher is making an analogy between the benefit to the community-at-large accorded by specialization and the notion of Justice as benefiting one’s friends. Yet Socrates does not allow Polémarkhos to stop there. Our Gadfly next introduces “husbandry” and “shoemaking” as unrelated to human conflict, in order to separate the criterion of practical knowledge from the ostensible criteria of selective “benefit” and “harm.” In the long run, the relentless impetus of the dialectic demands that a new paradigm must be posited that will do a better job of describing the true nature of Justice. Methodologically, this is Kuhn in a nutshell.¹¹

¹¹ Plato’s consistent reification of knowledge in identifiable *tekhnai* is merely a preliminary stage in his full dialectic. I have always thought of his project as sort of proto-Kantian: Plato begins by subjecting portrayals of “fact” that are not grounded in true experience, such as Ion’s mnemonic performance of Homer, rather as prefiguring the renowned Kantian epistemological principle

The reader will justly object here that my appeal to construe a similarity between Vico's project and Plato's is fundamentally faulty because, in terms of a poet's functionality in Panhellenic culture, Plato makes no distinction between the preliterate bard and Nagy's Period 3 Panathenaic rhapsode. Plato's dialectic leads to the conclusion that virtually any form of *poiēsis* (making) that involves *léxis* (word-choice) and *métron* (metrical repetition) distracts the mind in its search for *alēthē* ("not forgetting the true"). This negative principle is especially evident in Book X of the *Republic*, where Socrates condemns all forms of meter except one as dangerous, and roundly characterizes the Homeric heroes as terrible role models. My response is that the problem that both Vico and Plato attempt to address is the tendency for inherited "texts" to encourage cultural stasis. Indeed, this is the very essence of the contrast between the "Homers" of Books Two and Three in the *Scienza Nuova*.

Simonides' "dark speech," as Plato's Socrates characterizes the irrationality of *poiēsis*, glosses my point that Bloom's "strong poet" reflects a paradox. From the standpoint of Romantic poetics, Mnemosunē's long-established strictly ritualistic (and hence formal) role allowed the Romantics to throw off the bonds

"Concepts without percepts [, which] are empty." (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781). In a sense, the Philosopher-King whom Plato envisions is someone who will be able to accomplish Kant's objective of accurately reconciling percepts and concepts.

of Classical *auctoritas*. This is especially true among the English poets Bloom has always so marvelously explicated. He has maintained that Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Browning, Stevens, etc., feel pressed not just to imitate, but to emulate their models by “emptying themselves out,” a strategy Bloom calls *kenosis*. I generally accept this view, wishing only to stress that there are degrees of both *clinamen* and *kenosis*, depending on the individual poet’s attitude toward the tradition. Thus Blake¹² and Wordsworth approach the past with brash iconoclasm, while Keats and Coleridge exhibit a candid anxiety that their *mímēsis* should be eminently recognizable in order to show reverence and worthiness. The first of these two types of response, I feel, qualifies Bloom’s underlying premise that the strong predecessor intimidates *all* strong poets.

¹² William Blake’s repudiation of the tradition is manic, absolute, and “anti-self-conscious,” to use Geoffrey Hartman’s term. For example, in the prologue to his counter-Miltonic epic *Milton*, Blake utterly vilifies the Classical corpus:

The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid: of Plato & Cicero. which all Men ought to contemn: are set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible. but when the New Age is at leisure to Pronounce: all will be set right: & those Grand Works of the more ancient & consciously & professedly Inspired Men, will hold their proper rank, & the Daughters of Memory shall become the Daughters of Inspiration.

Shakspeare & Milton were both curbd by the general malady & infection from the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the Sword.

Both responses indicate that, in England at least, Romantic polemics coming after Vico and Rousseau give much evidence of a drive to *repel* Memory as it functions in an oral-evolutionary model, and substitute texts that compensate for a pervasive “Greeklessness.” In short, to the extent that the Romantic Movement “re-textualizes” Homer it runs in the opposite direction from Vico, who is advancing toward “un-textualizing” Homer. I refer back to Webb’s insight about the English Romantics’ preference for Chapman’s “Greekless” loose renderings over what they palpably but wrongly considered Pope’s pedestrian inaccuracy.

Presentations on “The Homeric Question” as the Romantics receive it generally move from Vico to F.A. Wolf to Robert Wood to Herder, and so forth. The intention has been to show that the burgeoning Romantic Movement in a sense “facilitated” the gradual shift of perspective on Homer I’m Homer toward a modern oral-composition paradigm. Until recently, I accepted this basic view as basically accurate. Then I read Webb, who makes this very enlightening comment about the import of Pope’s Homer:

The objectives of translation, whether stated or merely implied, are often complex and need to be examined in terms of a potential readership. Pope’s translation was probably intended to reach the Greekless [] as both the congenial style and the explanatory essays and notes indicate, but it was intended to be read by those who

were privileged enough to know the language, and perhaps Homer's original, as is shown by the frequent use of Greek in the notes.¹³

This observation obliquely recalls Bentley's clamorous accusation that Pope was "Greekless." Again, his charge merits skepticism, and is best approached as a hermeneutic problem. Ironically, as Shankman presents it, knowing that Bentley's assertion exaggerates Pope's incompetence elevates the caliber of Pope's *Iliad* and uncompleted *Odyssey*. Meanwhile, "Homer" in the more authentically "Greekless" Romantic period is essentially an abstract concept that is better represented by Chapman's free rendering than by what they see as Pope's conventionality. As Webb goes on to say:

By the Romantic period, that is from about 1770 onwards, the sense of the division was no less acute. The most notable example of the Greekless reader is, perhaps, that of John Keats. His sonnet "On first looking into Chapman's Homer" (written in October 1816) acknowledges with particular force the opportunities accorded to well-intentioned ignorance. (p. 303)

I would replace Webb's "well-intentioned" with something like "Angst-ridden." Keats often seems to approach *mimēsis* with palpable "literary dread." (I invoke here Kierkegaard's title *Begrebet Angest*, which was once conventionally translated as *The Concept of Dread*. The Princeton translation is *The Concept of Anxiety*.) In his great Keats biography, Walter Jackson Bate notes that the epebe

¹³ p. 303.

poet “appears to have *memorized*” [Bate’s emphasis] *Lamprière’s Dictionary of Classical Dictionary of Mythology*; one can interpret such fastidiousness as compensation for the lack of a public school education. This preparatory act was made necessary by Keats’s vocation, which he heeded *despite* not having gleaned¹⁴ the mythology from the ancient poets themselves. It exemplifies my notion, which counters Bloom’s gloss of Derrida, that the availability of the written interferes with cultural Memory. This second-hand access to the Classical corpus is one cause of what Thomas McFarland has called the Romantic “originality paradox”:

The intensification of the paradox arising from an alteration of relationship between the individual ego and the conditions of community—an alteration that becomes clearly visible with the Romantic era—is a counterpart, both logically and historically, of a problem with regard to individual talent and the existence of intellectual tradition. Romantic egotism, which was their response to the palpable diminution of a meaningful self, . . . is paralleled by the cultural use of an emphasis on originality.

The important point to be derived from Webb and McFarland is that, by interpolating into the tradition the new criterion of originality that pretends to shun that very tradition, the Romantics expressly abandon the Pope-versus-Bentley *agon*. They are in search of a poetic mode that excludes the intermediary irritant translator completely. The seemingly inevitable result is a

¹⁴ I am “reenacting” Keats’s lines “When I have fears that I may cease to be / Before my pen has glean’d my teeming brain” . . .

“Homer” that is yet another “text” which the “strong” poet must somehow confront with a view toward superseding. Evidence of this “textual fixation” is the frequency with which the Romantics link Homer and Shakespeare as “geniuses”—that is, as supernal wordsmiths and natural-born psychologists. It is a linkage that has continued to the present.

At first blush, it might seem as though the determined Romantic effort not to become just another set of belated copyists like Plato’s *Ion* was in reality faithful to the image of the Archaic bard, because the poets of the Romantic era often claim that they prize creativity above all other aspects of verse-making. The problem with this paradigm is that, with the arguable exception of the often metaphysical Blake, they are fully aware that the convention of being inspired is *ersatz*. (In this regard, consider my earlier remarks on the aesthetic *agon* between Wordsworth and Coleridge.) This difference between a literary pose and a cultural tradition firmly rooted in belief is the central factor which separates poets who write, no matter how earnest they may be in seeking to recapture preliterate times, from the preliterate figures that ethnographers like Parry, Lord, Nagy—and, yes, Vico in Book III—elucidate. Thus, in Nagy’s preliterate Periods 1 and 2, which I count as having lasted approximately 1400 years, there was none of Bloom’s “reading the poetry of X”; there was no “reading oneself,” even in the figurative sense. The bard’s professional function was to

become the organ through which the Muse (not the bard) spoke. One must stress here that this was no pose; it was a matter of *pístis*, or sincere conviction. In *Poetry as Performance* (pp. 60-62), Nagy contends that the hard-and-fast distinction between *aiodós* and *rhapsoidós* is an oversimplification: for him, the fluidity of the earliest periods does not end with exclude the rhapsodes *per se*. Hence he points out that Plato's *Ion* as a "rhapsode" is a critical representation of a diachronic movement from the creative "re-performer" to the static "re-performed."

Nagy's critics have tended to be skeptical of this position because they find it hard to conceive of a scenario in which epic poetry could have been transmitted for generations without the *aide de mémoire* of a written record. For example, in an assessment of *Poetry as Performance* for *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (97.3.21), Barry F. Powell of the University of Wisconsin summarily dismisses Nagy's "fine-tuning" of the distinction between the two compositional modes as reflecting an overconfidence in the capacities of oral transmission:

Does N[agy] . . . think that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were sung by Homer, not taken down in writing, then sung by a successor nearly verbatim (except for such minor variations as *poludeukea/poluekhea*), still not written down, then sung by someone else, with still more *mouvance* and a shifting of lines here and there, new particles creep in, then in the sixth century BC sort of written down, and then in the fifth century BC really written down, but still with *mouvance* going on, until the Alexandrians at last established our text? Yes, N. does believe this.

Powell's tone reflects his own insistence that for the purpose of transmission the poems were put in writing through dictation. He also claims that

despite N's repeated claims to work within traditions of the Parry-Lord theory of oral composition, he denies the theory of the dictated text, a keystone in the Parry-Lord model, and he fatally denies an essential difference between the singer who composed in performance (the *oidós*) and the reciter (the *rhapsoidós*), who memorized a written text for public reperformance. (*ibid.*)

Elsewhere, Powell extrapolates that *one* person from Lefkadi in Euboeia, whom he dubs "the Adapter," reworked the West Semitic sign-system (for he insists this was not technically an alphabet) into the Greek alphabet in the eighth or ninth century B.C.E. for the express purpose of "writing down" the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The violence this theory does to any notion of oral transmission is palpable.

I have several responses to Powell's critique. First of all, Nagy does not "fatally deny an essential difference between the singer who composed in performance (the *oidós*) and the reciter (the *rhapsoidós*"); he merely attempts to give the two modes diachronic nuance. Second, the reader will note that Nagy's Period 4 actually *does* suggest something like "a dictated text" in the with the phrase "transcripts or even *scripts*." In a recent clarification, Nagy has said:

My own evolutionary theory is not at odds with dictation models per se. I need to stress that I oppose not the idea of dictation but the application of this idea to various . . . [modern competing oral-evolutionary models].¹⁵

¹⁵ *Homeric Responses* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2003), p. 5.

Nagy ever resists introducing writing too early into the model because he posits a bardic tradition disseminated throughout Hellas that remained “fluid” for a very long time. According to Nagy, this continuity-in flux persisted primarily because it was so long independent of a fixation medium. Quite ironically, Powell’s proposition that one “Adapter” designed an *ad hoc* medium that immediately disposed of Memory’s function (rather than in the mode of Bloom’s Derridean paradigm) is more hypothetical than Nagy’s model, which reflects the crucial observation Albert B. Lord made in the course of comparing South Slavic models with Homeric ones: “when writing is introduced and begins to be used for the same purposes as the oral narrative song, . . . the older art gradually disappears.” This is indeed the essence of Plato’s argument in the *Ion* concerning the “uncreative” status the rhapsode had assumed. Powell, I believe, further distorts Nagy’s position when the word “verbatim,” which applies much more readily to Plato’s rhapsode Ion than to a preliterate “(re-)performer.”

Even the ancients have better basic models to explain Homer’s dialect heterogeneity than does Powell, since many of them posit an original oral poet, a history of some kind, and a multiplicity of source-texts. And although Pope and Bentley are forced by the nature of translation to mask this *poikilia* (Aristotle’s word meaning “variegation”), at least they do not ignore the import of Homer’s

diachronic linguistic provenance, as Pope's Preface to the *Iliad* and Bentley's methodical discovery of the digamma disclose.

The current Wikipedia article on "Homer" starts with the following disclaimer: "This article contains material that appears to contradict itself. Please help us fix it." Even given an assumption that this article is meant to provide only basic information that is reasonably dependable for people who are not experts on Homer, and even given that Wikipedia is notorious for, *inter alia*, allowing its own readers to act as overconfident emenders in the lineage of Richard Bentley, I contend that the confusion in the popular mind over "the Homeric Question" is still only slightly less prevalent and more forgivable than that of the Homer scholars.

For example, recently I saw a program on the History International Channel called, in supreme confidence, "The Real Trojan War." Among the experts interviewed was Barry F. Powell, the very critic I have cited who has condemned Nagy's "(re)-composition-in-performance" model as too confident in the *muglighed* that a preliterate *epos* might have been transmitted and thus preserved *in toto* over thousands of years. Professor Powell told the audience, in supreme confidence, that the Greeks adapted the Semitic alphabet *for the express purpose* of recording the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The producers did not take the trouble state that Powell's theory is only one among many; moreover, they

repeated the principle several times during the program. The net effect of this fundamental claim was that the viewers were themselves being “programmed” to accept that, even though there had been a long cultural flow of bards culminating in what we know of as the “works of Homer,” the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are best thought of as fixed texts like *War and Peace* or *Paradise Lost*.

Note that even such “modern” cognitively “fixed texts” have features similar to those of evolutionary preliterate *epos*. E.g., the 1665 version of *Paradise Lost* is substantially different from the 1667 one; it is longer by two books, and the theology is quite changed. In a sense, then, the latter version is a subsequent “(re-)composition-in-performance” of a fundamental *epos*. In fact, I am only being minimally facetious when I point out that, since Milton evidently dictated his Muse-inspired lines to a corporation of amanuenses, he is a more believable model for Powell’s Homer-*qua*-redactor than is his putative recorder of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In sum, “evolution” is not the exclusive province of that troublesome oxymoron known as “oral literature.”

In all the material I have discussed lies a “Homeric Question” that will probably never yield an answer satisfying everyone: namely, how to quantify and reconcile the simultaneous contradictory phenomena that together constitute the “oral-versus-written” problem. This obstacle, in turn, involves several interrelated matters having to do with the celebrated literary unity of two

separate epic texts emerging from millennia of (re-)composition-in-performance. A good way to transmit a sense of just how knotty these issues are is to present three of them as paradoxes:

1. What we have as “Homer” are the remains of a single *putatively oral* poetic genius who left a stunning *literary* corpus for which diachronic “(re-)composition-in-performance” does not immediately account. From a phenomenological perspective, even the current oral-evolutionary advocates have difficulty with this paradox.

2. By general agreement, this *univocal* Homeric corpus emerged out of a tradition of performance that depends heavily on the ground principles of *polyphony, individual creative autonomy, and geographical dispersion*. How can this “Panhellenic voice” paradox be resolved?

3. Achilles and Odysseus do things that place them in song-cultures—notably Achilles being portrayed singing *klea andrôn* and Odysseus hearing Phormios and Demodokos in the Phaiakian court. The salient aspect of these tableaux to the present discussion is that they are latecoming: exactly *when* they are supposed to have happened is indeterminable, and actually rather unimportant in the context of specifically *oral* transmission. This last *ainigma*¹⁶

¹⁶ Clearly, the immediate English cognate of this very old Greek word is “enigma.” In using it as an alternative to “paradox,” I am trying to take advantage of its power as an expression of an existential concept which only a mythology could convey. It refers to the ambiguous answer that the oracles at (to mention the most prominent

merits expansion. To begin with, it signifies how the “fixed” Homeric material made possible by the encroachment of Powell’s (hypothetical) Adapter from Euboía brings a sudden end to the song-culture. Subsequently, the figures of Achilles and Odysseus mutate according to the “values” of the ages in which their deeds are “reenacted” (Nagy’s rendering of Aristotle’s coloring of *mímēsis*). The overall impression a hermeneutic study produces is that as human beings Achilles and Odysseus can even be said to deteriorate. This is a byproduct of “textuality.” It is a phenomenon similar to the one Albert B. Lord describes through which printed (i.e., “textualized”) South Slavic songs were no longer sung.

examples) Delphi and Cumae gave to petitioners’ anxious queries. The *ainigma* in its historical context had important ethical dimensions. Ironically, its true power lay in the necessity that it be interpreted by a third party; the ultimate arbiters were not the Delphic Oracle or the Cumaean Sybil themselves, but rather the priests, who could be bribed. This historical practice, in turn, had its origins in *mūthos*, where those who were archetypally “qualified” understood the code. Nagy observes as follows:

As a difficult code that bears a difficult but correct message for the qualified and a wrong message or messages for the unqualified, the *ainos* communicates like an enigma--to use an English word that was borrowed from and serves as a translation for the Greek *ainigma* (as in Sophocles *Oedipus Tyrannus* 393, 1525), which in turn is an actual derivative of *ainos*.
(*Pindar’s Homer*, page 232)

Oedipus, we remember, responds correctly to the Sphinx’s riddle: “What creature walks on three legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening?” In answering “Man,” Oedipus survives. It seems to me to that the *ainigma* of whether Homer is a tradition or a set of canonical texts has similar characteristics, both inciting hermeneutic fear and perpetuating the cognitive drive toward the comfort of a unified narrative that displays the Aristotelian *phronesis* we associate with professional authorship.

Yet it is not exactly the same thing. For there is also the intervening factor of translation across languages and cultures. Essentially, the “text” is being pulled in two directions at once. On the one hand, the tradition loses most of its fluidity; on the other, the ossified figures of the tradition, such as Achilles and Odysseus, themselves become *homunculi* representing the possibility of permutation within the literary tradition that receives them. Another way to express it is to say that there is tension between the concepts of “tradition” and “authorship / *auctoritas*.” I staunchly maintain, *contra* Derrida as interpreted by Bloom, that the necessary intrusion of textuality into The Homeric Question does not preserve cultural memory, but rather vitiates it. While in general this principle creates space for the original genius, it also happens to present problems for modern critics seeking to describe the integration of the Homeric corpus into Western literature.

I offer a protracted example. In the conclusion to her study of the reception of Achilles from Homer onward, Katherine Callen King summarizes the various synchronic “simplifications” of Achilles:

The charisma of Homer’s Achilles . . . emanates from a unique combination of physical and mental qualities. He has continued to live in poets’ imaginations because by endowing him with a personality as superior in its complexity as his body is superior in strength and martial technique, Homer made his actions reverberate far beyond the battlefield. It is the force of this archetype that empowers most of the later, more one-sided evocations. Who, for example, would be very much interested in the *Odyssey’s* Achilles if

the *Iliad* did not exist? For although in many ways the character is true to the *Iliad's* – anger, honesty, prowess, glory, concern for honor, all the famous characteristics are there – it lacks depth. The Odyssean Achilles' concern for honor is uncritical, and his glory comes not from granting Hektor's funeral but from the grandeur of his own. In the *Odyssey* the poet's attention is on a more positive aspect of the human condition, and therefore a simplified, one-dimensional Achilles is adequate to supply the desired contrast. A simplified Achilles was adequate to the various political and philosophical purposes of the subsequent Greek poets as well, since the veneration accorded the *Iliad* ensured that Achilles would in any case be revered by all. The simplified Achilles seems to have accompanied equally simplified interpretations of the *Iliad* as a whole, interpretation whose supreme valuation of the warrior function or was empowered by the charisma of the original hero but reflected little of the complex humanity that created it.¹⁷

King's summary of her study here focuses on the diachronic *literatur'nost'* of the Achilles figure. Yet almost paradoxically, she has syncopated the European edition, stretching from Bronze Age *epōs* all the way to the Renaissance, into a single figure of *auctoritas* – i.e., “Homer” as a creator of characters which are subsequently “modified” to reflect the particular values of individual European cultures. This syncopation prompts, for example, King's problematic assessment that “Homer made his actions reverberate far beyond the battlefield.” Although her invocation of a literary “Homer” is obviously for the sake of rhetorical convenience – for she is an expert on the tradition – it is quite reminiscent of Pope's ill-informed-yet-confident 1720 scholium that Homer “was not satisfied

¹⁷ *Achilles: Paradigms of the War Hero from Homer to the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), p. 222.

with the language as he found it settled in any one part of Greece, but searched through its different dialects with this particular view, to beautify and perfect his numbers". . . .

Within this perspective, King appears to commit what could be considered another instance of the "Homeric authorial fallacy" when she says that the *Odyssey's* version of Achilles "lacks depth." This is like saying that the character Huckleberry Finn is "less important" in *Tom Sawyer* than when Mark Twain gave Huck his own epic. This statement is acceptable, but it is because both protagonists are the product of a single individuated "teeming brain." Twain is one author consciously trading upon the appeal of a secondary character by making him the protagonist of a sequel. A diction which might reflect modern theories of Archaic pre-literate "composition-in-performance" better would probably be something like: "Whereas the *Iliad* focuses on the time-honored epic theme of Achilles' *mēnis*, the *Odyssey* takes up that part of the Panhellenic tradition that separately values the particular *kléos* of Odysseus."

King also says that the *Odyssey* is more "positive" than the *Iliad*. Her adjective evidently refers to the difference between Odysseus and Achilles as heroes. That is, Odysseus survives the Trojan War specifically because he is *polútropos* / *polumētis*, thus ensuring the posterity of Ithaka. But possibly the most significant aspect of Odysseus' *kléos* is that he is the only survivor. The

Homeric poet specifically sings that the *nóstos* (homecoming) of all the other Achaeans was disastrous. If the controlling theme of the *Odyssey* is *nóstos* in general, then much of it is not really “positive.” The prime foil to Odysseus in this regard is not Achilles but Agamemnon, who has killed his daughter, brought home Cassandra as his “rightful” *timē* (prize/spoils/ chattel), and who ends up being murdered by his wife Klaitemestra and her lover Aigisthos. Moreover, even in making it back to Ithaka, as the “poet” takes the trouble to express, Odysseus undergoes many hardships/pains (*álgea*) in achieving his return.

What I am driving at is that, regardless of the era, reading the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* involves engaging in a cognitive *ágon*, a struggle not to forget the truth that one cannot easily, if at all, experience the vital hermeneutic factor of diachrony. Here I invoke, as does Nagy in the passage from his *Mythology and Poetics* cited above, Hesiod’s construal of *alēthes*, “true,” according to its individual morphemes as *a-lēth-es*: “not + forget +ADJECTIVAL MORPHEME.” In terms of linguistic philosophy, the principle of “(re-)composition-in-performance” means that “Homer” has actually been a long succession of Wittgensteinian “states-of-affairs” reflecting what Schopenhauer calls “change-in-time.”

But here I find that I am obligated to contradict myself. Notwithstanding the problems that King’s syncopations pose, her perspective is perfectly

allowable, since it is a sound analysis of Achilles *as a literary figure* in the New Critical sense of being a component of two separate “epic texts.” So, I ask, is there a way to accommodate both Nagy’s and King’s “Homeric ontologies,” so to speak? The tendency to seek readerly intelligibility is a constant nemesis to those who conceive of Archaic epic as a set of *performative* traditions. Yet such a criterion is necessary. In this I take issue with John Miles Foley when he says, “scholars and fieldworkers generally concur that the supposed Great Divide of orality versus literacy does not exist.”¹⁸ Foley explicates this statement by referring to Homeric reference to the “Bellerophon tablet” in the *Iliad*, Scroll Six. This famous epic awareness of alphabetic writing has always been cited as evidence that the *Iliad* must have been composed, at least in part, after writing had been “invented.” Foley asserts that whether or not this is true is of no real import. He argues instead that *semata*, or referential signs, are the true tool of organization the Homeric poet uses.

I do not think Foley’s confidence that no watershed cultural moment exists between Homer as oral tradition and Homer as some sort of textual record is at all well-founded. As the disagreement between Powell and Nagy exemplifies, there is indeed universal recognition that there was some form of “Great Divide.”

¹⁸ *Homer’s Traditional Art* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p. xiii.

The real problem that is being investigated and the ongoing Homeric Question, and that has yet to be “solved,” stems from the fact that the nature of the “Divide” is still a mystery. Just where, when, and how the transferral of the tradition from “the oral” to “the written” took place will always be a matter of deep and passionate dispute. Note that Powell, for one, cannot even imagine a coherent transmission without the interposition of a non-oral technology. And even Nagy concedes in the course of his five-stage model that the gradual fixation of a canonical Homeric text was initiated at some point in Periods 2 and 3. To be specific, I refer once again to Nagy’s paradigm:

(2) a more formative “Panhellenic1” period, still with no written texts, from the middle of the eighth century to the middle of the sixth BCE

(3) a definitive period, centralized in Athens, with potential texts in the sense of *transcripts*, at any of several points from the middle of the sixth century BCE to the later part of the fourth BCE; this period starts with the reform of Homeric performance traditions in Athens during the régime of the Peisistratidai.

Whatever happened between the “text-less” Panhellenic period 2 and the transcripts of the “definitive” period 3, it certainly seems to imply the existence of a real “Great Divide” to me.

What if we argue for legitimate yet mutually exclusive states of “Homer”? Positing archetypes for both character and creator makes perfect sense in the context of King’s specific emphasis on European literary *reception* over the “oral-evolutionary” model which Parry and Lord pioneered. The contradiction is that

King's synecopation is obviously not "naïve." Neither is it "wrong" in any real sense. The expediency of speaking of Homer as a singular individual genius producing, as it were, an archetype that subsequently mutates, is a vestige of the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* of which it is practically impossible for us to disembarrass ourselves.

To mount a defense of King's "synchronico-literary" approach to the Achilles figure, I have chosen to introduce a quibble that Donald Phillip Verene has with David Marsh's Penguin translation of Vico's ubiquitous *carattere* in the *Scienza Nuova*.¹⁹ Marsh usually renders this word as "archetype"; Verene argues that there is no need to reject the cognate "character." Concerning what Verene calls the "univocal" quality of "rational intelligibility," Verene sees no ambivalence on Vico's part:

Vico uses "character," not "archetype" (which he could have used), because it is connected to writing. He does not have in mind the sense of characters in fiction. He had in mind the sense of character as a mark, connected to his conception of hieroglyphics. Poetic characters are the terms in which the imagination writes out civil wisdom; they are "signs." (p. 98)

Verene implies that Vico never uses *carattere* in a context that could reasonably mean "archetype." He is trying to emphasize that Vico's model for the continuum of human culture entails transmission by various forms of writing.

¹⁹ "On Translating Vico: The Penguin Classics Edition of the *New Science*" (*New Vico Studies*, vol. 17, 1999, pp. 85-107).

(Note the similarity here to Derrida's concept of a "scene of writing.") While this interpretation accommodates Vico's reliance on the evidence of history as a form of anti-Cartesian empirical knowledge, Marsh's rendering seems more faithful to Vico's consistent underlying project of trying to identify recurrent cultural behaviors. This implementation of *carattere* must not be either confused with or conflated with that of a recorded "sign." Nowhere is Vico's "anti-literal" use of the word *carattere* more evident than in "The Discovery of the True Homer," where we find this example at 873: ". . . [Q]uest'Omero sia egli stato un'idea ovvero un carattere eroico d'uomini greci, in quanto essi narravano, cantando, le loro storie." I translate thus: "[T]his Homer was an idea, or rather an heroic archetype, of the Greek people [uomini], who narrated [cf. Nagy's "recited"] their stories, singing them."²⁰ Here I have modified the Bergin and Fisch translation of 873, which I earlier quoted verbatim in my Section 7 to reflect Vico's insistence through "narravano, cantando" that originally Homeric poetry was oral, and his deliberate exclusion of even a hint of a written "sign." The linkage of "idea" with "heroic archetype" encourages, in my view, a comparison with Plato's "Idea." More important to the present argument, Vico's conviction that in preliterate Greece rhapsodic "ontogeny

²⁰ Marsh's translation is ". . . Homer was an idea or *heroic archetype of the Greeks who recounted their history in song*" [Marsh's emphasis].

recapitulated phylogeny” (to appropriate the slogan Darwin’s contemporary Ernst Haeckel coined to summarize his theory of *biological* recapitulation) makes way for Nagy’s Periods 1 and 2.

In her 1994 article on the reception of Achilles in the Renaissance, King translates the opinion of the Renaissance critic Paolo Beni:

But already I [Beni] seem to hear someone who opposes me in favor of Virgil [*sic*] arguing: “I don’t wish to deny, for now, that Goffredo had been made a more noble model of a strong and wise captain than Achilles, who is represented by Homer has not only subject to amorous passion, and (as they say) as inexorable and harsh and one who seems often enough to make all his justice (*ragion*) depend on force, but also as avaricious, cruel, and proud. So he shows himself when he savages Hektor’s corpse and when finally he sells it to the afflicted father. Besides this, he sheds copious tears when he laments the lost Breseis and leaves the noble martial enterprise for a who woman, not for anything worthy of a strong knight and hero. Another example is his complaining in fear to the Goddess Thetis lest flies (I will say it though not without some blushing) outrage the dead Patroklos or rather (to keep his own words) lest they enter his wounds and breed worms so that the corpse might become putrefied and deformed; this feeling and thought seem to me to be base and lightweight, and unbecoming to a generous and a well-bred (*costumato*) knight.”²¹

This Renaissance *reception* of Achilles supports the position that King’s archetypal analysis in her earlier work is defensible, since it traces the evolution of Achilles *as a literary figure*. Beni’s reading of Tasso is, after all, a flagrant Bloomean misprision; but one must keep in mind that Bloom conceives

²¹ “The Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” *Homer*, Katherine C. King, ed., (New York: Garland Press, 1994), p. 13.

misprision as inevitable, yet not *necessarily* lamentable. For otherwise, how would the Tassos, Shakespeares, Miltons, etc. be “made possible?”

So again, what if we posit two simultaneous yet equally “real” states of “Homer”: flux *and / or* fixity? Compare Kierkegaard’s precondition for an eventual ethical *Ophævelse* captured in his famous title *Enten / Eller* (*Either / Or*). Ultimately, the Derridian *différence / déférence* point of anxiety boils down to just this concept of a deferral, an inexorable tendency toward syncopation owing to diffusion and the loss of cultural Memory. And this loss occurs *despite* misprising efforts to recover the preliterate *poiēsis*, which was by its very nature inimical to textual fixation (*autoritas*).

By sheer coincidence, Vico comes to King’s aid with a direct comparison of Tasso and Homer. Donald Philip Verene has summarized Vico’s response to Tasso admirably:

The individuals in question are each in some fundamental sense Godfrey. Their being is literally Godfrey’s being. They are not “like” Godfrey but “part” of Godfrey. They are Godfrey dispersed. Vico’s term for Tasso’s imagining Godfrey is *fingerere*, not *fantasticare*, because Tasso is not a poet of the age of gods or heroes. Yet the logic which forms the hero Godfrey is that of the heroic mind itself. The mentality of the heroic age did not imagine, in the sense of pretending or feigning, but univocally predicated the figure of a particular hero of a class of individuals. Imaginative class concepts (*generi fantastici*), says Vico, “have a univocal signification connoting a quality, and to all their species and individuals (as Achilles

connotes an idea of valor common to all strong men, or Ulysses an idea of prudence common to all wise men.²²

This self-contradiction elucidates what I hold to be the most interesting element of the Homeric Question: When was the syncopated Homer of the *Scienza nuova's* Books Two and Four, of Keats and Milton, of Barry F. Powell, made possible? This first interpretation is the legacy of strata of editions and translations, all plagued by the un-Homeric problem of being fixed in writing. But then there is a competing model within the confines of early Romanticism itself, represented by Vico's Book III, Rousseau's Homer, and Macpherson's hoax Ossian as "bought into" and then appropriated by Goethe in *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*. This group prizes the "time before texts," when poetry was both spontaneous and multifarious.

CASEY!

Another way of looking at it is from the perspective of today's oral-evolutionary paradigm. Of all the major Hellenists specializing in Homer, Gregory Nagy seems to have the most confidence in the possibility of oral transmission over generations; in this he is being true to his mentor Albert B. Lord. In my opinion,

²² *Knowledge of Things Human and Divine: Vico's New Science and "Finnegans Wake"* (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 183.

the ingredient in Nagy's theory that allows for this possibility is the "fluidity" of Periods 1 and 2. This is the factor Plato's "recalling" *rhapsôidos* Ion is lacking. Every other current scholar I have looked at is more skeptical than Nagy that the whole Panhellenic culture could transmit its *aoidoi* intact across thousands of years before inventing a way of preserving them in Derrida's "writerly" understanding of cultural Memory. It is clear that when Nagy compliments Vico for being "intuitive," he is referring to Vico's contention in Book III that "Homer" was an oral, diachronic, institutional, national phenomenon.

11. IS THERE A LATENT JURISPRUDENTIAL PARADIGM IN VICO'S BOOK III HOMER?

Much Vico scholarship has been dedicated to analyzing Homer as more or less secondary to Vico's larger purpose, and up to this point I have taken this perspective. But why not try a more oblique hermeneutical tack? Why not entertain the idea that Vico's paradigm for Homer can be thoroughly explicated and understood through his obsession to be recognized as a masterly theorist of jurisprudence?

Ever since oral-formulaic composition has dominated our understanding of "Homer," the empirical fact of the conversion from an active oral tradition into the written *mimēsis* of one has been a problem for Homeric scholarship. Many scholars would probably find it extreme to express it this way: after all, there is a fairly wide consensus about approximately "when" Homer was no longer transmitted by the *aoidós* and began to become the "property" of the *rhapsôidoi*. The impression one gets from surveying the scholarship is that the loss of the *tekhnē* of oral composition-in-performance (which evolved—as per a diachronic model lent credibility by, e.g., testimony from works like Plato's *Ion*—into the memorization and *epideixis* of Homer as lettered "scripture"; cf. Nagy's Period 5) is somehow equivalent to the "loss of Eden" (Milton), and that the

literary Homer is consequently “post-Lapsarian.” The polarization of these competing paradigms—the *aoidós* trained within a not-fully-recoverable tradition to exercise creative license within a form, versus the *rhapsôidós*, a latecoming beneficiary of a Derridean / Bloomean / Powell-esque “scene of writing” (cf. Lucian’s *fabula*) whose function was to interpret the work of a legendary individuated “genius”—would seem both to explain and justify Vico’s ambivalence concerning Homer. Vico’s ambivalent treatment of Homer in the *Scienza Nuova* as both of these *caratteri* fits completely within the rhetorical ambience to which he was accustomed.

To help shape this perspective I will be relying here on John D. Schaeffer’s 1990 analysis of the status of legal argument in Naples in Vico’s time. Schaeffer has observed that ambiguity was the form argumentation commonly took in Neapolitan intellectual circles:

In Vico’s Naples, contradictions and oppositions lived in constant dynamic balance. [The result was] . . . a sediment formed by a sequence of different political, social, and legal formations, each superimposed on the other but not displacing or even controlling its predecessors [T]he new philosophy of the Enlightenment was reaching Naples and in being discussed in salons and informally organized groups of intellectuals. These discussions were not merely speculative, for Naples was the scene of a confrontation between the Enlightenment philosophy and social practice.

The University of Naples and the law courts were the two focuses of that practice, and these two institutions formed of the

immediate context of Vico's rhetorical theory. Intense orality¹ characterized these two institutions. The university and the law courts continued to feature oral performance and adversarial thinking in ways that decisively shaped their practices—and their supporting theories. Because they were the arenas of social conflict, the university and the courts were also the focal points of reform, and reformers competed for their control.²

Schaeffer observes two particular things about Neapolitan intellectual circles that pertain to my study. He notes the “intense orality” of the culture. He establishes that legal discourse in Naples was immediate to the context; hence it was also necessarily dialectical in the core sense of the Greek *dialégesthai*, “to carry on a back-and-forth discussion,” rather than depending on codified statutory law, as in other parts of Italy:

In Vico's time law meant arguing from precedents that were not written down, but that were preserved in oral tradition. Thus the legal system shared the inheritance of oral rhetoric with the university. But the practice of law in Naples had little to do with the Roman law that formed the content of university courses. Lectures in Justinian's *Pandects*, for example, were singularly unsuited for actual legal practice Law students studied a body of law that Naples did not have, but which was the one body of law that epitomized legal thought—Roman law. To this extent law students exercised themselves in an ideal realm. But legal education it do one thing for its students: it gave them experience in legal

¹ Note Schaeffer's appropriation here of his dissertation director Walter J. Ong's paradigmatic word, which Ong typically opposes with “literacy,” intending to describe the development of culture that led to the *technological* “progress” of European culture “made possible” by writing, which eventually evolved into the print media.

² *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 35.

argument and forensic rhetoric, and that was certainly a *sine qua non* for legal practice in Vico's Naples. (p. 47)

In his book, Schaeffer does not address Vico's interest in *The Homeric Question*. Nonetheless, when he writes of this Neapolitan legal oral performative culture that prevailed before 1703 as "a sediment formed by a sequence of different political, social, and legal formations," his metaphor virtually calls forth Nagy's five-stage Homeric paradigm, which hypothesizes a persistent "multiformity" (Albert Lord's term), even during periods of predominant crystallization / fixation (cf. Nagy's Periods 4 and 5) that have culminated in the canonical Homer. To support this comparison, I repeat a passage I quoted earlier from Nagy's *Homeric Questions* concerning the mythic interpretation of lawgivers throughout the Greco-Roman continuum:

On the basis of the other narrative traditions . . . concerning the topic of an archetypal text that disintegrates in the distant past only to become reintegrated at a later point by a sage who then gives it as a gift to his community, the story of a "Peisistratean recension" can be explained as a *mūthos* that bears clear signs of political appropriation by the Peisistratidai. Particularly striking is the parallelism in the accounts of Plutarch and Cicero between Lycurgus, lawgiver of Sparta who gives his community the Homeric poems, and Peisistratos, described as one of the Seven Sages, who likewise gives his community of Athens the Homeric poems. . . . Greek myths about lawgivers, whether they are historical figures or not, can to reconstruct these figures as the originators of the sum total of *customary law* [my emphasis] (p. 74)

Notice also that Nagy's point about the centrality of mythically based "customary law" (*nómos*) in Ancient Greece and Rome bears a wonderful affinity with Leon Pompa's assessment of Vico's far-sighted perspective on Homer's "multeity-in-unity": "Vico . . . [concludes] that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are products of different historical societies." (*Study of the "New Science,"* p. 139)

On the ground assumption that Vico was driven by an unflagging desire to be recognized as a jurisprudential theorist on a par with the legal theorists Grotius and von Pufendorf, Schaeffer's background information provides a solid empirical basis for reinterpreting Vico's embedding of "The Homeric Question" in the *Scienza Nuova*. As a *dominant* cultural *Tendenz* (to borrow Friedrich von Schlegel's enthralling word from his 1798 essay "Ueber die Unverständlichkeit"—"On Unintelligibility"), the autochthonous Neapolitan dependence on oral argument provides a *verum/factum* proof clarifying the otherwise rather fuzzy issue of why Vico feels the need to make Homer part of a work nominally applying *science* to *history*. Vico's preliterate "*rapsòdi*" are "made possible" as archetypes, not only of the Neapolitan *cantastorie*, but also of the Neapolitan *togati*, who were, like Nagy's archaic creators of Homeric song, taking pride in composing and orally performing *ex tempore*. The function of the *togato* was to use the forensic *tekhnē* he had learned after years of apprenticeship to apply pertinent unwritten law (a specialized form of the *fabula*, if you will) to

specific cases. Thus a successful *togato* not only had to be creative and resourceful, like *polumētis* Odysseus, but ideally possessed a memory worthy of Demodikos or Phemios. Schaeffer remarks:

The Neapolitan judicial system was an arena in which the various classes and interests of the society competed in a kind of ritual combat. The *togati* served as a kind of legal *condottieri* [security force] available to serve barons, communes, or the government. They considered themselves the heroes [my emphasis] of this perpetual civil struggle. The *togati* needed a reputation for disinterestedness as much as a reputation for skill in verbal combat and so could not afford to join any side or class if they wished to continue their careers. (p. 50)

Within the context I am suggesting Schaeffer's characterization of the *togato* brings to mind all three major Achaean heroes. Besides Odysseus, there are Achilles, the native Thracian mercenary who leads the Myrmidons against the Trojans on behalf of the Achaeans; and Agamemnon, whom the Homeric poet gives the epithet *anax andrôn* ("king of men"), who leads the expedition against Troy not only because he is the brother of Helen's husband Menelaus, but also because he apparently has the most ships under his command. I propose that in these figures Vico has available Homeric *caratteri* for both the *condottiere* and the *barone* of early eighteenth-century Naples.

My extrapolation is not as strained as it may first appear if one considers the etiological and etymological aspects of Vico's use of the Greco-Roman continuum. To offer evidence, I present these two adjacent paragraphs

from Book IV and ask my reader to consider them in the light of Schaeffer's epitome for Neapolitan courtroom argumentation—"ritual combat":

§962. It has not been believed that the first barbarism practiced dueling, because no record of it has come down to us. But it passes our understanding how the Homeric Cyclopes, in whom Plato recognizes the earliest family fathers in the state of nature, can have endured being wronged, to say nothing of showing humanity in the matter. Certainly Aristotle, as cited in the Axioms [§269], tells us that in the earliest commonwealths, not to speak of the still earlier state of the families, there were no laws to right wrongs and punish offenses suffered by private citizens (as we have just proved was the case in the ancient Roman commonwealth); and therefore Aristotle also tells us, as cited in the same place, that this was the custom of barbarous peoples, for, as we noted in that connection, peoples are barbarous in their beginnings because they are not yet chastened by laws.

§963. However, there are two great vestiges of such duels, one from Greek and one from Roman history, showing that the peoples must have begun their wars (called *duella* by the ancient Latins), with combats between the offended individuals, even if they were kings, waged in the presence of their respective peoples, who wish to publicly to defend or avenge their offenses. In this fashion certainly the Trojan War began with the combat of Menelaus and Paris (the former the wronged husband and the latter the seducer of his wife, Helen); and when the duel was indecisive the Greeks and Trojans proceeded to wage war with each other. And we have already noted the same custom among the Latin nations in the war between the Romans and the Albans, which was effectively settled by the combat between the three Horatii and the three Curiati, one of whom must have abducted Horatia. In such armed judgments right was measured by the fortune of victory. This was the counsel of divine providence, to the end that, among barbarous peoples with little capacity for reason and no understanding of right, wars might not breed further wars, and that they might must have some notion of the justice or injustice of men from the favor or disfavor of the gods: even as the Gentiles scorned the saintly Job when he had fallen from his royal estate because God was against him. And on

the same principle in the returned barbarian times the barbarous custom was to cut off the hand of the loser, however just his cause.

§962 merits detailed examination, based in large part on Vico's rather surprising reliance on the Turkish-born geographer and historian Strabo (64/63 BCE-ca. 24 CE), who wrote a 17-volume *Geographia* in Greek (this reliance, incidentally, further counter-indicating, any notion that Vico's knowledge of Greek was actually deficient). The immediate source of Vico's claim in §962 regarding the Cyclopes is not Plato, but Strabo. In fact, Vico refers to Strabo's own reference to Plato's telling of the Cyclopes *mūthos* (in the *Laws*, Book III, 677ff.) quite early in the *Scienza Nuova*, in Book I, "Establishment of Principles":

§296. In Strabo, there is a golden passage of Plato saying that, after the local Ogygian and Deucalionian floods, men dwelt in caves in the mountains; and he identifies these first men with the cyclopes, in occasionally whom elsewhere he recognizes the first family fathers of the world. Later they dwelt on the mountain sides, and he sees them represented by Dardanus, the builder of Pergamum which later became the citadel of Troy. Finally they came down to the plains; this he sees represented by Ilius, by whom Troy was moved onto the plain near the sea, and from whom it took the name of Ilium. (my emphasis)

The forward location and propaedeutic tenor of this paragraph demonstrate how important it is for Vico's reader to maintain a good memory for the *mūthoi* he narrates in the course of his global argument. Here he painstakingly links a

foundational *mūthos* of Greek civilization—“the idea of the work,” so to speak, that, as the *auctoritas* Plato recognizes, the “first fathers of the world” were not truly human, but were instead the anthropophage Cyclopes (referring mainly to *Odyssey*, Scroll IX, lines 287ff.). From this state these proto-human creatures evolved to become mountain-dwellers, and from there, apparently without significant intermediary mutation, to the human subjects of Homeric poetry, though Vico does not seem to want the issue of nomadic blind poets to intrude at this crucial moment in his etiology. A significant element of this *mūthos* / *fabula* is the Vico’s association of civilization (more particularly, agriculture) with a downward and outward topographical shift.³ In the wake of the five-stage process Nagy describes, the “written *auctoritas* Homer” initiates “his” epic, the *Iliad*, through a weirdly modern *lógos*, seeking in the “Exordium,” at line 8, a first cause for the events “he” will be narrating: “Who among the gods was it who set the two of them [i.e., Achilles and Agamemnon] against each other in a quarrel?” (my translation) Similarly, Vico (very possibly emulating Strabo) analyzes the historical development in terms of.

³ Even earlier in the “Establishment of Principles” Vico cites Strabo to establish a triple correspondence among geography, linguistic development, and cultural primacy:

§71. When Strabo judges . . . that Attica, because of its rocky soil, could not attract foreigners to come and live there, he does so in order to support the further assertion that the Attic dialect is one of the first among the native dialects of Greece. (my emphasis)

The truly striking aspect of Vico's appropriation is the context within which the Cyclopes reference occurs. I quote Strabo at length:

Plato conjectures . . . that after the time of the floods three kinds of civilisation were formed: the first, that on the mountain-tops, which was simple and wild, when men were in fear of the waters which still deeply covered the plains ; the second, that on the foot-hills, when men were now gradually taking courage because the plains were beginning to be relieved of the waters ; and the third, that in the plains.⁴ (my emphasis)

The “squinty-eyed” Greco-Roman historian Strabo *ignotus latet* behind Vico's Cyclopes reference, which is supposedly to the philosopher-*auctoritas* Plato, the latecoming literary Homer-substitute. Notice especially that Strabo's model for the development of civilization is remarkably similar to Vico's in the *Scienza Nuova*: it is tripartite; it is “simple and wild” in the beginning; it moves from the mountains to the lowlands (reminding us once again, almost chillingly, of Virgil's lines from *Aeneid* VIII, lines 321-322: *is genus indocile ac dispersum montibus altis / composuit legesque dedit*); it flourishes after the waters of the Flood have subsided. a motif which occurs in both the Hebraic and Hellenic traditions.

Strabo continues in a strikingly Vichian mode;

One might speak equally of a fourth and fifth stage, or even more, but last of all that on the sea-coast and in the islands, when men were finally released from all such fear ; for the greater or less

⁴ *The Geography of Strabo*, translated by Leonard Jones (London: William Heinemann, 1917), XIII i. 25, pp. 47-48

courage they took in approaching the sea would indicate several different stages of civilisation and manners, first as in the case of the qualities of goodness and wildness, which in some way further served as a foundation for the milder qualities in the second stage. But in the second stage also there is a difference to be noted, I mean between the rustic and semi-rustic and civilised qualities ; and, beginning with these last qualities, the gradual assumption of new names ended in the polite and highest culture, in accordance with the change of manners for the better along with the changes in places of abode and in modes of life. Now these differences, according to Plato, are suggested by the poet, who sets forth as an example of the first stage of civilisation the life of the Cyclopes, who lived on uncultivated fruits and occupied the mountain-tops, living in caves : " but all these things," he says, " grow unsown and unploughed" for them. . . . "And they have no assemblies for council, nor appointed laws, but they dwell on the tops of high mountains in hollow caves, and each is lawgiver to his children and his wives." And as an example of the second stage, the life in the time of Dardanus, who "founded Dardania ; for not yet had sacred Ilios been builded to be a city of mortal men, but they were living on the foot-hills of many-fountained Ida." And of the third stage, the life in the plains in the time of Ilus ; for he is the traditional founder of Ilium, and it was from him that the city took its name. (ibid.)

These paragraphs encapsulate a conspicuous number of the major themes in the

Scienza Nuova

In §962 there is an indirect reference to the oral versus written dilemma. Its subject is whether dueling as a method of adjudicating grievances could have preceded the establishment of written law. The immediate obscurity of Vico's position requires us to pause. To begin with, he states that it has heretofore been thought impossible to assume the practice of an institutionalized custom if

there is no written record of it. This supposedly standard position only makes sense, however, if we assume an automatic connection between some form of elementary retributive law and literacy. In my view, when Vico says “but it passes our understanding how the Homeric Cyclopes . . . can have endured being wronged,” he is denying the necessity of such a connection. Rather, Vico’s implication is that the custom of dueling to settle the kind of matter that would later be subject to a statutory remedy could well have existed, and even thrived, far prior to a written record of it. Note that in this paragraph Vico *begins* with Homer specifically to drive his point home; he wants his reader to remember his observation in the “Idea of the Work” at §23 that Homer “left none of his poems in writing.”

Vico associates this element of the Homeric narrative with the construct he has explicated that pagan/barbarian societies consisted of *gentes*, or clans, and credits Plato, on the testimony of Strabo viii, with an early natural law theory based on his reading of the Cyclopes tale. He then moves on to demonstrate how familial structures developed into “commonwealths.” I interpret Vico’s word *repubblica*, “commonwealth” as reaching after the Aristotelian concept of the *pólis*.⁵

⁵ Bergin and Fisch note that in their translation “*Repubblica* is uniformly rendered ‘commonwealth’ to avoid the misleading associations of ‘republic’ in English.” (p. ix) A further interesting gloss on Vico’s usage emerges when we remember that we call Plato’s most famous dialogue the *Republic* because that is how Cicero

The very necessity of making the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into “texts” that can be analyzed as “literature” has ramifications that are not imminently apparent. As we have seen, the oral-formulaic paradigm in its broadest form (of which Barry F. Powell, for one, simply cannot conceive) is that the cultures that generated and transmitted the *mūthoi* that make up the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as the lost epos now represented by the Epic Cycle) were able to maintain a body of “epic” material for thousands of years before writing. Ancillary to this tenet is that oral and written versions of “formulaic behavior,” if you will, often exist side by side within the same relatively confined cultural environment, as we recall from Albert B. Lord’s 1997 revised assessment of the relationship between the performances of the *guslars* and the availability of “songbooks.” In the meantime, Barbara Graziosi’s apparent contentment with the premise that *rhapsôidós* ultimately encompasses both “stitcher-together of song” and “holder of the recitation staff (*rhabdós*)” further attests to the elusive nature, of the process through which “the oral” eventually became “the written.”

As much as I am convinced that Gregory Nagy’s version of the paradigm best accounts for the evidence, I also believe that there are aspects of “Homer” as

rendered Plato’s *Peri politeia*, which can in turn be reasonably translated as *On the Elements of the Polis*.

a transmitted narrative unity that “recomposition-in-performance” still does not empirically address. I note that originally Milman Parry hoped to study the singers of the Kirghiz region of Central Asia. When Soviet authorities refused to extend him permission, Parry was forced to move to what was essentially his second choice, the South Slavic *guslars*. My “intuition” tells me that part of the reason why the Central Asian singers were Parry’s first choice might well have been that their songs are *long*, in the fashion of the Homeric epics. The songs of the *guslars*, by contrast, are typically short, self-contained narratives -- episodes forming parts of larger historical conflicts—that could be performed at “one hearing,” in coffeehouses and other places where audiences naturally gathered. Is it a distortion to say that the aspect of Homeric epic that Parry and Lord were originally most anxious to test was the capacity of the singers to “re-compose” from a mnemonic repository of thousands of lines? This interpretation of the Parry-Lord Hypothesis is problematic because it detracts from one of the seminal propositions of Nagy’s model, which makes the “verse” (or in “written” terms, the individual dactylic hexameter) the formative unit of *poiēsis*. Curiously, this focus on the individual line rather than the sweeping scope of the epic in its entirety makes me think of Edgar Allan Poe’s famous 1846 essay providing guidelines for the short story as a genre:

It appears evident, then, that there is a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art—the limit of a single sitting—and

that, although in certain classes of prose composition, such as “Robinson Crusoe” (demanding no unity), this limit may be advantageously overpassed, it can never properly be overpassed in a poem. Within this limit, the extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit—in other words, to the excitement or elevation—again, in other words, to the degree of the true poetical effect which it is capable of inducing; for it is clear that the brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect—this, with one proviso—that a certain degree of duration is absolutely requisite for the production of any effect at all.

I must make two points here. The first is that even though this essay is supposedly Poe’s response to a letter from Charles Dickens (the very embodiment of the methodical artificer of works of epic proportion), the example of the novel form Poe uses is *Robinson Crusoe*. I think Poe chose this example explicitly because it exhibits the rambling, picaresque *mūthos* (Aristotle’s *Poetics*: “plot”) characteristic of early European novels. This is quite evident from Poe’s phrase “demanding no unity.” The message is obviously that any extended literary form is inexorably subject to the danger of losing intensity.

If we substitute for Poe’s associated concepts of “short story” and “poem” (which are both manifestly brief in contrast to the novel) Nagy’s concept of “micro-narratives,” Poe’s “one sitting” criterion becomes quite relevant to epic. Indeed, his phrase can actually *gloss* problems associated with the Homeric epic such as “rhapsody” and “stitcher-together.”

Ironically, the Parry-Lord Hypothesis seems to apply least well to the first *sine qua non* for epic considered as a *written* genre: that is, its length. For it is not *primarily* length that distinguishes the “composition in performance” of oral epic, but rather, as nearly every scholar of the subject agrees, spontaneous creativity within a formulaic matrix. From the latter perspective, South Slavic *guslars* provide a perfect modern model for hypothesizing on the nature of the performance of Homer. This is clear to anyone who has had the opportunity to hear the recordings and view the films of the *guslars* that are in the Milman Parry Collection in Widener Library at Harvard. With no little paradox, there is an “anti-epic” quality about these performances: viewing them, one is struck by the rapidity with which the “lines” go by.

The notion of a mutual exclusivity between the “oral” and “written” Homers appears not only in Vico, but throughout contemporary Homeric scholarship. Given the intercession of textuality between us and the oral performance of epic, I would like to propose the appropriateness of a cognitive approach to the problem. I have adapted a principle from perceptual psychology. The Danish psychologist Edward Rubin is associated with the phenomenon of perception called figure-ground alternation. This aspect of perceptual psychology seeks to demonstrate that certain patterns presented to the visual field which have two different interpretations which cannot be

perceived both ways at once. My argument is that of Albert B. Lord's oxymoronic term "oral literature" essentially recognizes an analogical form of "figure ground alternation." In the meantime, this phenomenon has been transferred to the sphere of communication theory by – most prominently perhaps – Marshall McLuhan with his overly familiar principle that "the medium is the message." As he has written:

"[T]he ground of any technology is both the situation that gives rise to it as well as the whole environment (medium) of services and disservices that the technology brings with it. These are side-effects and impose themselves willy-nilly as a new form of culture." (Laws of Media, p. 475)

I contend that in a fundamental sense the oral and written "states" of Homeric epic (cf. Wittgenstein's term "states-of-affairs" as he used it in the *Tractatus*) are cognitively incompatible: I challenge the reader to deny that, try as one may, it is *impossible* to conceive both a diachronic, Panhellenic *tekhne* and a "text" at the same time, despite one's awareness that both forms have existed. This is the source of most of the disagreement about Homer. Here is an impromptu partial list of generalities about Homer that the cognitive problem could be said to generate:

1. Despite being a product of diachronic, Panhellenic dissemination, as an artificial *literary* language, Homeric Greek is strikingly well-integrated in the Russian Formalist sense of displaying *literatur'nost'*.

2. The Homeric image from antiquity to the present is of a *singer* who, whether blind or not, could not write. This observation may seem facile and unproductive, but I assert that it is not. I have actually heard some Homerists say, in the course of introducing the epics to students, that before Parry and Lord did their fieldwork in Yugoslavia, people didn't know that the Iliad and the Odyssey were composed orally. This is not true, and is not really what they, earnest as they are, are trying to say. I believe that what they really mean is something like this: "Before Parry and Lord, there was no empirical evidence for a *tradition* going back through antiquity that some permutation of the illiterate singer actually existed." In other words, even in antiquity, it was actually understood in some manifestation of Carl Jung's "collective unconscious" that "Homer" composed orally. Moreover, the so-called "Analyst" position as its precursors -- in Horace and elsewhere -- seems to me to entail A.B. Lord's important concept of "multiformity." (Note, by the way, that this issue of interpreting the "One and Many" conundrum was also an important impetus of Heinrich Schliemann's own misguided "discovery of the true Homer.")