

I

Approaching the *New Science*

Giambattista Vico has been long regarded as a prominent figure in the history of Italian thought. His connection to Italian history, however, is a bit nebulous. He did not live during a particularly celebrated or especially infamous era in Italian history. He lived during the long period between the Renaissance and the Risorgimento when the Italian city states had lost their political influence and many had fallen under the direct control of foreign powers. While the peninsula produced notable works of art and science during this time, it does not capture the imagination as other periods in Italian history. Living in the province of Naples from 1668 to 1744, he was born into a Spanish colony, saw its ownership transfer to Austria after the War of Spanish Succession, and then saw it gain independence under Charles of Bourbon in 1734. More deeply and immediately, he witnessed the Neapolitan nobility entrench its power. While the central administrations of other regions were consolidating their power, the Neapolitan barons were solidifying their authority over their fiefs against the king. As a mercantile class grew in other parts of Europe, the Neapolitan middle class struggled to gain traction and evolve.¹ Politically and economically, Naples and Italy during Vico's lifetime were not at the forefront of what are now recognized as the major trends of European political and economic development. I wonder if this is part of the reason why he is often considered to be an outsider to the major trends in early modern thought. Had he written at the height of the Italian Renaissance like Machiavelli or during a turbulent period in the twentieth century like Antonio Gramsci, it might be easier to see how Vico's ideas connect to larger trends in Europe. As it is, Vico tends to be referred to as an innovator who thought about issues of anthropology, history, and interpretation long before others, but he is not studied as a voice among his contemporaries in the eighteenth century.

This study is an attempt to bring Vico into conversation with the more prominent early modern thinkers in Northern Europe. I use the term *early modern period* as it is used by historians of philosophy to describe the era between the end of the Thirty Years' War and the rise of Napoleon. It includes the Enlightenment and the Baroque period of Italian history. Philosophically, it runs from René Descartes and Thomas Hobbes to Immanuel Kant. I am not going to characterize Vico as an anti-Enlightenment outsider who critiqued mainstream ideas from afar. Instead, I will highlight his place within the prevailing European intellectual culture to show how he produced ingenious answers to the same problems that other authors were addressing. Throughout this study, I will identify philosophical problems addressed by prominent schools of thought during this period and show how Vico's ideas grow out of them. I hope that this will not only make the *New Science* more approachable to scholars of early modern thought but also will encourage them to consider Vico worthy of a place in conversations about the prominent issues of the period rather than a curious anachronism.

I will avoid pulling Vico out of his historical context. I will interpret his ideas through the lens of the distinct economic and political environment in which he lived. He had access to popular works of Northern Europe, since they generally circulated in Naples. My contention is that when one looks at the prevailing philosophical issues in Europe with the specific concerns of the Neapolitan community in mind, it is possible to develop a rich and full reading of his texts. This study will find in the *New Science* a possibility for an alternate pathway for considering the value of early modern philosophy. As commentators rethink what early modern philosophy means for our contemporary world, I hope that the voice of Vico and other thinkers of the Neapolitan Enlightenment can shed light on overlooked possibilities.

The starting point for this study is an insight proposed by Giuseppe Giarrizzo in his collection of essays entitled *Vico: la politica e la storia*. Vico's later works contain an extensive and detailed account of ancient Roman law and religion. One is tempted to wonder whether his systematic discussion accurately portrays Roman history. Giarrizzo avoids this question entirely. He argues that Vico's account has much more to say about the political situation in early modern Naples than ancient history.² Indeed, he is convinced that Vico's analysis of ancient Rome was motivated by a desire to understand contemporary political structures so that he could propose ideas for reform. He writes, "One should not forget, however, that the Vichian perspective is political and not social (concerned with anthropology [*primitivistical*]) and that his argument

always moves from the present to the past and not vice versa.”³ This implies that Vico’s interest in history was not primarily metaphysical or theoretical but was to find a way to improve Naples and Europe.

Vico tells the reader that he is thinking in these terms. He does not highlight this agenda as much as other ideas, but he does present it at the end of the *New Science*. As I will discuss, Vico’s historical metaphysics proposes the existence of a cyclical ideal eternal history through which nations repeatedly pass. In accord with this, he suggests that after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, civilization fell into a barbaric state. When it rose again, the same laws that founded the original Roman civilization reappeared. Book 5 of the *New Science* is titled “The Recourse of Human Institutions which the Nations Take When They Rise Again,” and it describes how the aristocratic institutions of early Rome appeared again in Europe (1056). He writes that, “in countless passages scattered throughout this work and dealing with countless matters, we have observed the marvelous correspondence between the first and the returned barbarism times” (1046). He is not just thinking about ancient civilizations as distant historical entities, but he is considering them in relationship to medieval and modern Europe. Importantly, he goes farther.

He actually tells the reader that it is easiest to understand the period after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, what he calls the second barbarism, by examining the birth of ancient Rome out of the first barbarism. He writes that by investigating the original rise of Roman civilization, “we shall bring more light to bear on the period of the second barbarism, which has remained darker than that of the first” (1046). He repeats this idea when he connects ideas of authority and ownership in early Rome to those in medieval Europe. He writes, “Upon this ‘authority,’ as upon numberless other institutions of the second barbarism, we throw light in this work from the antiquities of the first barbarism; so much more obscure have we found the times of the second than those of the first!” (1074). This may sound counterintuitive since one would expect events more chronologically proximate to be easier to grasp than more distant ones. Nevertheless, it was a common approach within the natural law tradition. Authors in that tradition were quite concerned that medieval laws were recorded in a corrupt way by scholars and church leaders who separated themselves from the cultures that produced them. The continued political influence of the church presented an obstacle for interpreting those records. To avoid contemporary bias, authors looked at ancient Roman law, since it was a clearer picture of feudal society.⁴ Vico claims that because he lives in the civilization produced by the second

barbarism, it is hard to see clearly how contemporary institutions grew out of it. By looking at the distant past, it becomes easier to conceive of the way civilizations manifest recurring trends.

Vico does not endorse Giarrizzo's point exactly. While he was very concerned about developing an objective method for his science, his Enlightenment perspective made him far more optimistic about his ability to understand Roman history than he had a right to be. Giarrizzo claims that the way to find value in Vico's ideas is to see them as depictions of his Naples rather than a description of Rome at all. Vico gives us no reason to think he would ever concede this much. Nevertheless, I am going to take his claim about his motivation for studying ancient Roman law as a cue to build an interpretation of the *New Science* as a discussion of modern Europe and, specifically, modern Naples.

Giarrizzo finds in Vico's works a valuable political agenda. He saw the possibility of evolving a just community in which people of all classes are treated fairly. He was also concerned, however, that a civilization would break apart if too much liberty were granted to any one class of people. So, he proposes that the goal of politics is to find a balance between the restrictive institutional bonds that hold civilizations together and the need to help a community evolve toward justice. Giarrizzo writes, "The work of the wise-prudent [*sapiente-prudente*] ruler is that of finding the equilibrium of justice between the rigid jurisprudence of the aristocratic regime and the looser jurisprudence of the monarchy."⁵ The wise lawyer can grasp laws in their historical context and apply them in a way that serves justice at the expense of some of their traditional rigidity. In this light, Vico's writings become a critique of traditional laws in order to establish a just legislative system in Naples.

This study will try to give content to this political agenda. It will do so by examining a topic that Giarrizzo does not substantially address: poetic wisdom. Like a variety of twentieth-century commentators on Vico, Giarrizzo acknowledges that Vico's account of myth and language should fit into his political agenda, but he does not explore it. He writes, "the theories of language and heroic poetry, that ought to take on almost an autonomous level, are evidently developed to sustain a political argument and not vice versa, so also for his audacious proposals for a theory of myth."⁶ He thus dismisses Vico's account of the Roman pantheon to focus specifically on Vico's account of universal law. My study will venture where Giarrizzo does not. It will establish the political significance of Vico's account of poetic wisdom by revealing it to contain a critique of the Neapolitan feudal aristocracy.

In my interpretation, Vico's account of poetic wisdom is an attempt

to explain the history of Roman law and religion by exposing the underlying epistemological structure of the aristocratic minds that invented the pagan gods. Given Vico's stated objective, this mentality should have also produced the religion of the Middle Ages, and its rudiments should persist in the minds of the Neapolitan barons who continue to use those rituals to maintain their authority. Vico's discussion of the poetic wisdom critiques that mentality to help monarchs and lawyers better understand how aristocratic laws can be reformed. When a contemporary reader looks at Vico's fantastic and speculative account of the development of Roman religion, it certainly does not appear to be a discussion of the Neapolitan barons. Despite this, I argue that the better one understands the feudal institutions that dominated early modern Naples, the better one can see how his specific interpretations of myths fit those institutions.

For most of this chapter, I am going to outline some methodological concerns underlying this study. I will discuss what my approach to Vico's mythology will take seriously and what it will avoid. I will then discuss my strategy for developing a historically contextual reading of the *New Science* that still has philosophical value. In the third section, I will talk about Vico's own methodology to help think about how one should read his interpretation of the pagan gods. This will culminate in a discussion of the tension between Vico's metaphysical commitments and the idea that he is a political reformer. I hope that this will clear the way toward building a reading of the *New Science* as an examination of what is valuable about the ancient mentality and what calls for reform.

Before embarking on that, however, I would like to say some initial words about why this project might have philosophical value. I am portraying the *New Science* as an anti-baronial critique of the authoritarian structures of oligarchy. Is this a topic that contemporary political philosophy should be taking seriously as it considers the legacy of early modern thought? The current prevailing idea of early modern political philosophy centers on the development of social contract theory in thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In this framework, the primary concern is whether the people or a monarch or dictator should be the ultimate authority. Social contract theory argues that a government can only have legitimate power if it is granted by the people. A ruler must protect the rights of the people who grant that authority. This undercuts theories of divine right monarchy that hold that a central leader has an inherent right to decide how to rule. This tradition examines the history of institutions to identify when people's rights are adequately protected and when a monarch has

become too powerful. In this context, political philosophy becomes an attempt to contrast the liberty given by democracy with the practical efficiency of a tyrant. In this paradigm, oligarchy is generally excluded. Vico makes one wonder whether the role of aristocracy is left too far outside of this discussion. Because the resistance to political evolution in Naples was coming from an aristocracy rather than a monarch, he developed an early modern philosophy that challenged the power of the aristocratic class.

A foundational argument in the *New Science* is that the first societies were neither democracies nor monarchies but oligarchies. I will examine this argument in detail later. Here, I draw attention to axiom LXXX, which states “Men come naturally to the feudal system [*ragione de’ benefizi*] wherever they see a possibility of retaining in it or gaining from it a good and great share of utility, for such are the benefits [*benefizi*] which may be hoped for in social life” (260).⁷ This axiom is central to this study. Vico’s political philosophy holds that the real threat to modern civilization is the possibility of regression into feudalism and oligarchy. The threat may not literally be the possibility of a return to a system of fiefs and sharecroppers. It could mean that society regresses to the point that judicial and economic systems become an instrument for sustaining aristocratic privileges. If this is a concern that the contemporary world ought to take seriously, then perhaps the *New Science* may offer insight into it.

I want to point briefly to some examples that suggest democratic political systems in the West might be regressing to oligarchies. Particularly in the United States, Italy has a reputation for being a country that leans toward socialism. Yet, during his time as prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi oversaw the privatization of the Italian highway system, selling it to the private company Atlantia, which was a subsidiary of Benetton. In October of 2015, when Matteo Renzi served as prime minister, he privatized the Italian Post Office. Given that neither industry is particularly amenable to competition, this appears to be a case where the aristocrats have turned these services into revenue streams for their particular interests. It also extends the power of the aristocracy over the lower classes and removes their ability to have input. Once an industry is privatized, it is difficult for elected officials representing the people to supervise and restrain their activities.

In the United States, one can see a trend of business executives finding ways of removing consumer protections. During the late twentieth century, class action suits became popular as ways for consumers to force corporations to respond to their needs. In response to this, com-

panies started including clauses in contracts that require parties to go to forced arbitration rather than civil court. Businesses have set up their own civil court system to adjudicate the complaints of consumers who have signed away their right to file claims in federal court. The United States Supreme Court ruled this to be constitutional in the case *American Express Co. v. Italian Colors Restaurant* (2013).⁸ As a result, millions of citizens of the United States sign contracts waiving their right to civil lawsuits without realizing it. These are ways in which the aristocracy is not just building its wealth but is finding a way to get control over the decisions that affect the lives of common people.

These two examples do not in themselves demonstrate a general trend. Further, I do not mean to suggest that a collapse into oligarchy is the only thing that contemporary democracies need to be concerned about. Nevertheless, I wonder if it may be valuable to consider an alternate early modern paradigm that takes seriously the role feudalism has played in history and the possible danger of the return to oligarchy. I propose that Vico provided one such paradigm. As consumers in contemporary neoliberal economies come to worry more about the growing gap between the rich and poor, it may be productive to consider Vico's ideas within the legacy of early modern thought. Like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, Vico was concerned about helping civilization advance to a point where everyone would be treated with justice and respect in a secure environment. Because he sought to understand the institutions and mentality of the aristocrats rather than monarchs, his answer may have insights the others have overlooked. I think this possibility invites us to take his *New Science* seriously. With this in mind, I turn to a discussion of how I will approach Vico's investigation of myth.

Ancient Pagan Religion and Problems of Interpretation

Giambattista Vico tells us that for most of his intellectual career he searched for the proper way to understand pagan mythology (34).⁹ I will focus on the result of this journey as articulated in the 1744 *New Science*. His discussion of this topic is undoubtedly unusual to anyone coming to it for the first time. It does not read like other early modern texts that are now considered to be the bastions of this tradition. Despite its peculiar form, I maintain that his account is a serious philosophical investigation. In this section, I want to show how seriously Vico took this project as an initial justification for connecting it with his political philosophy.

Many authors who have examined Vico's account of poetic wisdom have provided great insights into it as an epistemological system and as a defense of the philosophical value of the imagination. Often, however, these commentators do not get into the details of Vico's seemingly incongruous portrayal of specific poetic characters. My study will not ignore the fine points of poetic wisdom. I argue that if one understands Neapolitan feudalism, it is possible to build a coherent reading of these poetic characters. Given how outlandish some of Vico's claims are to the contemporary reader, this may not seem possible. As one becomes aware of how strange feudal institutions were, one can see how his depiction of the Roman gods functions as a sensible response. Much of this study will be dedicated to connecting his depiction of the Roman pantheon with feudal institutions. Here, I want to show that Vico took his anthropological study of ancient Roman law seriously as a way to begin my justification for examining the specifics of Vico's depiction of poetic wisdom. I will not try to explain every detail Vico offers, and I will bracket certain aspects of his argument. Nevertheless, my goal is to enter the details of the poetic wisdom to see it not just as an explanation of mythical thought but as a political critique.

Like other early modern philosophers, Vico wanted to remove sources of error and bias from his science. His initial attempt to combine the study of ancient Roman law and religion was his largest work that was a set of three volumes collectively called *On Universal Law* that was published in 1721–1722. In the second volume, he claims that scholars have assumed that ancient poetic texts represent a special artistic style of writing that was used for special purposes. They thought that it was distinct from an ordinarily discursive language that people normally used. He claims this false assumption prevented them from realizing that early languages were entirely poetic and reflected typical means of communication in very ancient cultures (CJ 74). This meant that the search for the origin of language had to focus on onomatopoeia and singing rather than naming. This insight became very important in the 1730 *New Science*, where Vico argues that Homer's epics were not special works of art written by one person but were the product of a large oral tradition.

In the 1725 *New Science*, Vico explored the question of how the poetic epics became distorted over the centuries before calcifying into their current form. He identifies seven sources of textual corruption that separate them from their original cultural significance (NS25 23). For example, the reason why myths tend to include giant monsters is because people exaggerate when telling stories. So the giant monsters would have really been humans. Further, myths can change meanings as the

significance of words in the myths evolve. Most importantly, as moral norms change, audiences expect different behaviors from heroes and their adversaries. Vico holds that as societies became more decadent, they would have wanted to see more licentious behavior from gods and heroes. Originally, however, they would have reflected a much more rigid morality (NS25 270–287). The specific examples he provides are often problematic. For example, he insists that the Latin word for gold originally signified wheat. This does not seem to be correct (NS25 280).¹⁰ Nevertheless, his general concerns about textual corruption appear well founded.

In 1730, Vico published a substantially revised edition of the *New Science*. He spent the final years of his life revising this text, which was then republished in the year of his death. There, the major impediment for interpreting myths becomes psychological. Axiom II states, “It is another 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” (122). This mental tendency leads to two problematic conceits. The conceit of nations causes one to assume that one’s own nation was the first to invent all the institutions of civilization (125–126). This conceit blocks one of Vico’s chief strategies for finding metaphysical truth in history. By using a cross-cultural analysis, he speculates that one can see how civilizations who have no contact with each other invent similar institutions such as religion and marriage. These independent but universal social inventions proves that they are an essential part of the course of history. If one focuses too much on showing that one civilization such as Greece or Rome created civilization first, one cannot see the universal course of history.¹¹ While this is important to Vico’s thought, the other conceit is more significant for his theory of myth.

The conceit of scholars causes them to believe that “what they know is as old as the world” (127). This leads them to think that ancient authors sought the same erudite metaphysical or moral insights that contemporary philosophers seek. They suspect that because the earliest thinkers were unimpeded by modern culture and technology their minds could penetrate deeply into profound truths. This leads them to pore over ancient fables and stories in order to find philosophical insight. In the *New Science*, Vico rejects this approach to myth.

Vico identifies Plato and Francis Bacon as two of his most influential authors (AU 138–139). Nevertheless, he accuses them of falling victim to this conceit. It is not hard to find examples of these two authors interpreting ancient texts to find buried wisdom. In the *Symposium*, Plato has Socrates present his view of the metaphysical assent to love in the

form of a myth related by the priestess Diotima. In 1609, Francis Bacon published *De sapientia veterum*, in which he found contemporary moral allegories in ancient myths. For example, he reads the story of Actaeon as a warning against prying, even accidentally, into a prince's secrets.¹² Actaeon's transformation into a stag represents the danger of being isolated from court life. The dogs killing and eating him represent the other servants of the prince taking advantage of the isolation. Both philosophers seem to think that the wisdom of ancient authors ought to be revered and studied. In response, Vico boldly asserts, "This discovery of the origins of poetry does away with the opinion of the matchless wisdom of the ancients, so ardently sought after from Plato to Bacon's *De sapientia veterum*." He announces that he will not excavate ancient texts to find ancient insights into philosophical truth or morality. Instead, in a manner consistent with what he said in the *Universal Law*, he will read these myths to understand the political institutions of ancient nations. He continues, "For the wisdom of the ancients was the vulgar wisdom of the lawgivers who founded the human race, not the esoteric wisdom of great and rare philosophers" (384). In his view, the ancients were indeed wise, but they were so because they could invent the rituals that were necessary to develop civilization and not because of their metaphysical insight. This establishes how and why Vico approaches ancient religion.

It is important to note that Vico himself had fallen prey to this conceit early in his career. In *On the Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, Vico sought enduring metaphysical insights in the etymologies of ancient languages. His famous *verum-factum* principle was a product of this investigation.¹³ He writes that because the words *verum* and *factum* were interchangeable in ancient Latin, it must be the case philosophically that one can know the truth only about what one makes (AW 45–47). Vico never abandons this idea entirely. By the time he starts writing the *Universal Law*, however, he emphasizes it much less and he stops using the ancient etymology as metaphysical evidence. He continues to do etymologies, but they are always to understand ancient Roman institutions and not philosophical truth. As Vico refined his approach, he became much more careful about his use of ancient texts.

As an example of how seriously Vico took the conceit of scholars, I turn to a passage where he discusses ancient symbolic writing. Before the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, it was tempting to look at Egyptian hieroglyphs as mystical inscriptions that lead to a magical truth. Vico realized that this was problematic. He specifically rejects the idea that Egyptian hieroglyphs had "the mystic meanings" (*i sensi mistici*) that the "learned" attributed to them (384).¹⁴ He claims that this writing was

suiting to the audience to which they communicated. Since early languages communicated through signs and gestures, they developed a written language based on pictograms to communicate what was important to them. These were laws, descriptions of rituals, and records of heroic acts. Vico's hypothesis turned out to be basically correct with regard to the Egyptian language. Vico also foretells the discovery of the Mayan language. For most of the twentieth century, the investigation of the Mayan glyphs was stymied by the assumption that they were mystical objects for meditation. Only after much work and academic conflict was it revealed that they communicated religious fables, histories, and laws.¹⁵ When Vico says something that anticipates later Western anthropological theories, I tend to attribute that to the fact that they write in the same tradition from the same set of assumptions. This particular anticipation shows that he recognized a tendency in modern scholars to seek mystical insights or ancient spirituality in ancient religions rather than see them in relation to political institutions. It also shows that he rejected the search for such spiritual meanings in mythic religions.

Despite these passages in Vico, the *New Science* cannot seem to shake its reputation for being a celebration of pagan spirituality. In chatting about Vico with others, I have encountered many who have assumed the *New Science* is a work of Renaissance astrology or romantic mysticism. As axiom II predicts, they have seen Vico's comments on the pagan gods and quickly associated him with familiar contemporary authors who sought spiritual metaphysical insights in ancient myths. This is understandable given both the pervasiveness of the twentieth-century desire to find common mythical traditions and the lack of research into the intellectual and political culture of the Neapolitan Enlightenment. Now that much more work has been done on early modern Naples, it is easier to see how Vico's discussion of poetic wisdom is a critique of the politics of ancient superstition similar to the projects of many other Enlightenment authors. To read the *New Science* in this way requires thinking about poetic wisdom as an analysis of the feudal politics of oligarchy rather than a work of spirituality.

The growth of Vico's search for interpretative errors contains a subtle but significant development. From the 1725 to the 1730 editions of the *New Science*, many details of Vico's account of myth do not change. Notably, his claim that thunder was the origin of language is present in the 1725 edition (NS25 104–105, 411). Nevertheless, the substance of his account changes. He now asserts that myths were produced by an alternate epistemological structure with a unique schema for conceptualization. In the first *New Science*, he had already seen the need for

bracketing metaphysical reflection to understand ancient fables (NS25 314). In the 1730 edition, he sees that poetic wisdom is a completely separate mentality and emphasizes the need to avoid conceptual bias to enter into it. He used the term *imaginative universals* to identify the type of concept used by poetic wisdom. These universals are at the center of my study, and I dedicate chapter 3 to interpreting them. Before arriving there, I will continue to lay groundwork by further explaining my method and some of the limitations of my study.

There is good reason to think that Vico tried to use the best information available to build his position. It may not seem that way because the sources he uses are very unfamiliar to most contemporary readers. Nevertheless, he did use recent reports from the Americas and Asia.¹⁶ His sources were limited, however, and despite a desire to do cross-cultural research, he did not have much evidence to work with and most of the *New Science* focuses solely on ancient Roman history. This makes his claims about his science's ability to find a truly universal pattern of history problematic.

It was common during the early modern period to search for universal patterns in history to explain the relationship between human nature, civil institutions, and natural law. Famously, social contract thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau speculated on the origin of civilization. David Hume wrote *The Natural History of Religion* to explain the origin of pagan religion.¹⁷ Many other now less familiar authors like secular natural law theorist Samuel Pufendorf built theories based on speculative accounts of the first laws.¹⁸ There was also an important tradition that debated the validity of feudal laws by speculating on the original political structures of ancient governments. François Hotman's work *Franco-Gallia* had a lasting impact on this tradition and other areas of early modern thought.¹⁹ Vico's Neapolitan friend Gianvincenzo Gravina wrote *Del governo civile di Roma*, in which he traces the history of Rome from its origin to show that civilization functions better when the monarchy cooperates with the plebeians.²⁰ The fact that Vico centered his project on an account of the origin of civilization is indicative of his connection to larger trends in early modern thought.

From a postmodern perspective, however, this type of project is deeply problematic. It is apparent that any early modern attempt to understand the origin of civilization was merely a projection of their own interests and perspectives onto the past. This leads me to Giarrizzo's strategy of reading the account of Roman religion more as an account of the mentality of the Neapolitan barons than as an account

of ancient Rome. I will then consider this as a critique of oligarchy that may have implications for understanding contemporary neoliberalism. I am not going to discuss whether Vico's account of myth or politics extends beyond early modern Europe and the contemporary situation in the West. Further, I will bracket any attempt to evaluate the universality of Vico's theory of myth as an account of cultural evolution. As I interpret the *New Science*, I will have to discuss it as an depiction of civilization's origin and the rise of ancient Rome, because that is the context in which Vico places it. This will be done in an effort to sort through and interpret the text. The philosophical question I want to raise will not be anthropological or archeological but will have to do with modern and contemporary manifestations of aristocratic authority.

Some may find this disappointing. Many come to the *New Science* out of a legitimate interest in pagan religion and ancient laws. Some may even come to the *New Science* to find metaphysical wisdom or even spirituality in very ancient religions. I wonder if this is a new manifestation of the conceit of scholars that could obscure the larger political message to be found in Vico's text. Contemporary Western thinkers have inherited a prevailing picture of mythical thought from twentieth-century academics and popular culture. This view probably has quite distant origins, but its immediate ancestors were the Romantic authors of the early nineteenth century. At the core of this pastoral view of mythical thought is the metaphysical idea that all things are unified into a type of world soul. Those living simple rural lives, unencumbered by technological or industrial responsibilities, can experience spiritual truth directly by working the land and engaging in pantheist rituals. This idea of pagan religion has probably always existed. Nevertheless, it became particularly prevalent in the twentieth century. It was popularly adopted by the countercultural movement of the 1960s. Psychoanalyst Carl Jung suggested that mythic symbols were evidence of archetypes in a collective unconscious. Authors such as Parker Tyler and Joseph Campbell found these archetypes in popular films.²¹ Movies such as the highly popular *Avatar* have depicted inhabitants on another planet as defending this worldview against an invasion of humans bringing weapons and machinery to destroy the environment. There is much more that can be and has been said about the popular appeal of this view of myth. My concern is that this image of pagan religion could obscure the dimension of Vico's thought that I want to reveal.

I have no interest at all in making philosophical arguments against the pastoral view of mythical thought or pagan religion. I would encourage readers to remember, however, that Vico wrote well before the

Romantics brought their view of myth to prominence. More importantly, my reading of the *New Science* will portray it as a response to concerns that were much different from those that popularized the twentieth-century view of pagan religion. I do not want to impede anyone from using the *New Science* to inform a more contemporary view of pagan religion. Like Timothy Brennan, I do not think it is possible to produce authoritative readings of texts, and I certainly do not think my study will produce a definitive reading of the *New Science*.²² Nevertheless, I want to open space for my reading by contrasting it with this prevailing twentieth-century idea of myth.

As the core of these philosophical theories of mythical thought was a desire to locate a communal connection that could bind people together in community and connect people to nature. An important place this was found was in the notion of *mana*.²³ This term is found everywhere in works on myth from the 1920s until the 1950s. It is a term taken from Polynesian religion that signified a magical force that animated and gave power to all substances. The existence of this term was reported by the Anglican priest Robert Henry Codrington. In the 1860s he had deeply immersed himself in the culture of the Melanesian people. He claimed *mana* was a substantive thing that rulers could acquire, have, and then use.²⁴ He described ways in which community leaders would tap into the energy of *mana* in some spiritual way to demonstrate their authority. When philosophers such as Mircea Eliade, Ernst Cassirer, and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl learned of this concept, they claimed that *mana* was at the core of a more basic distinction in pagan mentality between sacred and profane. At the earliest stages of mythical thought, *mana* represented the unified force that animates all things. Particularly for Cassirer, *mana* was the term that signified all experiences noticed by early mythical thinkers who were just beginning to formulate ideas and remember experiences.²⁵ Cassirer himself, of course, was quite concerned about possible negative uses of mythical thought. He expressed this in *The Myth of the State*, which was one of the first attempts to systematically demonstrate how the Nazis combined technology with mythical thought to launch their reign of terror.²⁶ Nevertheless, his epistemological account of mythical thought places *mana* at the center of a pantheist worldview that experiences the unity of thought.

Codrington's initial account of *mana* now appears highly problematic. His own desire to find magical unity in pagan mythology drove him to exaggerate the notion of *mana*. Recently, anthropologist Alexander Mawyer has shown that the term *mana* did not have any magical or ontological significance at all. It was simply a word that meant that

something was strong or useful.²⁷ Twentieth-century philosophers and religious scholars jumped on this idea of mana because it seemed to give strength to the notion that the universe was connected through a magical force. Because of the impact this supposed discovery had in the intellectual community, the term appeared throughout popular culture and, especially, many video games. The anthropological evidence now, however, suggests that the term is not so mystical or so omnipresent as was once thought. Regardless of the debate over this term, my point is that there is no reason to go into the *New Science* looking for an early discovery of this notion of mana. Vico's culture had very different concerns from the ones that made this notion so appealing.

There are passages in the *New Science* that lend themselves to this magical and pantheistic view of mythical thought. The most prominent example of this is the repeated emphasis he places on a saying of Vergil: "Iovis omnia plena," or, as Bergin and Fisch translate it, "All things are full of Jove" (379, 490, 515). This reference to Jove connects it to his account of the birth of pagan religion. This phrase comes immediately from Vergil's *Eclogue* but, as Battistini points out, the passage in Vergil comes from the poet Aratus of Soli (315–240 BC).²⁸ His surviving work, the *Phenomena*, is an extended account of astronomy and the constellations. He opens it with a prayer to Zeus (using the Greek name), who is in all things. All of us are the offspring of Jove, who has put the heavens in motion so that plants can grow. He writes, "He [Zeus] tells what time the soil is best for the labour of the ox and for the mattock, and what time the seasons are favourable both for the planting of trees and for casting all manner of seeds."²⁹ Aratus's point is that it is possible to read natural signs to see when one ought to sow and reap. This presents an idea of Jove as a pantheistic mystical force that animated all things. One could quickly assume that Vico's use of the phrase indicates that this is his view of poetic thought.

A more careful reading of Vico's use reveals a different purpose. In the spirit of Aratus, he admits that the first people looked to natural phenomena to understand the commands of Jove. He writes, "The first men, who spoke by signs, naturally believed that lightning bolts and thunderclaps were signs made to them by Jove" (379). He makes two important caveats, however. First, he does not think that the first people responded to these commands in a philosophical or even spiritual way. He writes that only later did Plato understand this phrase of Vergil as signifying "the ether which penetrates and fills everything" (379). In his view, attributing a metaphysical reading of Vergil's saying to the first poets means falling into the conceit of scholars. The ability to have a

metaphysical worldview would require a level of theoretical reasoning that the first poets could not have mustered (384). So, the first poets could not have experienced or understood Jove as a pantheistic world soul. Instead, they only responded to certain natural signs as if a person were communicating with them. In this view, poetic wisdom is not grounded in spiritual awareness or a mystical connection to a world soul but, instead, in responding to commands that they had unwittingly invented. The second caveat is that Vico tells us that directly that the primitive idea of Jove was false. He writes, "It is impossible that bodies should be minds, yet it was believed that the thundering sky was Jove" (383). Since the pagan religions lack a sound metaphysical basis, there is no reason to seek philosophical insight in these myths. Their significance, for Vico, is purely political.

Since the first poets thought of Jove as commanding like any other human would, it was possible for humans to imitate Jove and take on the role of the deity. Vico writes that Vergil's phrase "conferred human authority on those giants who had occupied the first vacant lands of the world, in the same sense of ownership" (490). Those poets who took possession of the first territories were able to command their followers as Jove did. Poetic wisdom is not about metaphysical truth but about systems of power and, ultimately, class dominance.

The pastoral view of myth obscures Vico's interest in the relationship of myth to class division. I speculate that the twentieth-century appeal of the collectivist view of myth was not so much that it was an alternative to technology but that it was a retreat from the growing wealth and power divide between the rich and poor. During this time, political systems such as communism and democracy were making bold claims about egalitarianism. Lived experience dictated, however, that the separation between the classes was not being overcome. While everyone could point to certain individuals who rose and fall in class status, class distinctions were not really going away. So certain individuals in the lower classes turned to a magical spirituality to escape their subordinate position while the upper class turned to it to deny the power they had over others. In this way, pagan religion became the egalitarian space from which one could deny social power structures. The *New Science* does the opposite. It uses myth to explain class division rather than find a time or place outside of it.

To speak directly, there are many religious and philosophical texts that discuss how it is possible to use myth to find spiritual wisdom. When one reads the whole *New Science*, one sees that very little if any of it is dedicated to the idea of a spiritual journey. It is primarily an attempt

to find a metaphysical order in the history of class conflict. When commentators have focused on it as a discussion of mythical thought, they have largely overlooked what it has to say about class conflict. As a result, they have overlooked most of the content of Vico's presentation of poetic wisdom. This study will start from the idea that his account of poetic wisdom feeds into his anti-baronial political agenda. In this way, I will develop an interpretation that holds together the political and epistemological dimensions of his thought while finding value in his depiction of the Roman pantheon.

To end this section, I want to close with an alternate image of pagan religion that highlights what I find in Vico. I offer this as a counterpoint to the images offered by films like *Star Wars* or *Avatar* that emphasize a pantheist view of myth. Bong Joon-ho's 2019 film *Parasite* garnered much critical acclaim and many major awards. As contemporary society becomes more painfully aware of the deepening class divide, his film paints an intriguing microcosm of how class functions. The film upsets the common view of pagan ritual as the purview of the lower classes. Bong places mythical thought or at least astrology in the realm of the upper class, while the lower class concentrates on survival and pleasure. This matches my reading of Vico's account of poetic wisdom. In the *New Science*, the poets are able to found civilization because they can hear and respond to the commands of Jove. The late comers come under their command out of the desire for survival and to satisfy baser interests (18, 555). This is what plays out in the mansion depicted in *Parasite*.

The film opens in the basement apartment of the Kim family, who are quite poor. Two college age children, Ki Woo and Ki Jung, are searching the apartment for free wireless internet access. This is exemplary of the way poverty drives the family members to seek creative solutions to matters of survival. While the family is not necessarily good at restraining their own passions, they are able to find ingenious ways of manipulating the system in order to survive and fulfill their own desires. Their biggest project becomes faking their way into jobs to serve the upper-class Park family.

Bong does not reveal the father's profession, and the audience is left to assume that he has some high-paying corporate position. Instead, Bong emphasizes the way he dedicates himself to obeying the rules of propriety. He is particularly concerned that class boundaries are not violated. He focuses on obeying the rules of upper-class politeness and strictly prohibits himself from entering the world of the servants. He also punishes any of his servants who violate these rules. His worldview is

constructed around self-discipline motivated by a desire to maintain his position in the upper class. The mother of the Park family obsesses over the social and educational development of her youngest son, Da Song. She turns to astrology and other unscientific methods in the hope that she can help him adjust. She channels her nervous energy into these rituals in a way that dominates her behavior despite their impracticality. The Kim family is able to exploit the superstitious tendencies of Mrs. Park and the rigidity of Mr. Park to scam their way into positions working for the family. The class conflict in the film depicts the adaptability of the Kim family against the self-discipline of the Park family.

Although this might not strike one as a movie about pagan religion, I suggest it depicts Vico's vision of poetic wisdom and class consciousness. As the film progresses, the Parks' inability to break out of their upper-class worldview becomes increasingly preposterous as it is revealed how detached their behaviors are from the world around them. Their worldview is constructed by a strict code of propriety and superstition that is fed by a desire to control themselves and distance themselves from others. While this code allows the rich family to have a sense of order and domination, it does not treat others with any sense of justice. It also turns out not to be a very practical way of organizing one's life and affairs. Vico's Naples was a city dominated by feudal lords who were also unable to adapt to changing situations. His account of poetic wisdom, in my reading, is an explanation of why this mentality was so strong and endured for so long. I think the Park family is a contemporary image of the barons that Vico hopes to critique.

The most famous work about myth in southern Italy is Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli*.³⁰ This work was based on the author's experiences while he was in exile in Basilicata in 1935–36. Besides showing the extreme poverty of the region, it suggests that the people in the region were following a pagan religion that was distinct from Christianity. This work reinforces the idea that pagan religion is for the lower classes. Vico, I will argue, can explain this manifestation of poetic wisdom. Even though it now seems counterintuitive, Vico depicts poetic wisdom as the mental structure of noble authority. This is at the core of my reading of the *New Science*.

Contextualizing Vico

Where did Vico sit chronologically? He was born in 1668, which was thirty-one years after the publication of René Descartes's *Discourse on*

Method.³¹ He died in 1744, the year the final version of the *New Science* was published. This was the same year that Jean-Jacques Rousseau served as secretary to the French ambassador to Venice, and it was just eleven years before the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* was published. Vico was twenty-two years younger than Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. He was seventeen years older than Bishop Berkeley, who published his *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* in 1713 and who outlived Vico by nine years. It is tempting to see all of these authors as living at the same time, but I think it is important to remember that Leibniz, Vico, and Rousseau really represent three different generations.

I have run across a few people who think of Vico as a Renaissance figure. There is, however, a substantial chronological gap between Vico and the Italian Renaissance. The 1744 *New Science* was published 232 years after Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* and 258 years after Pico della Mirandola wrote the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. There was much intellectual activity in Naples in the interim. Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), Giambattista della Porta (d. 1615), and Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639) were all active during this time. Early modern thought arrived in Naples and the Accademia degli Investiganti was established in the middle of the seventeenth century by a group of intellectuals that included Tommaso Cornelio, Leonardo di Capua, and Francesco d'Andrea. Its goal was to promote the philosophy of Descartes and the new scientific method generally.³² The intellectual scene in Naples had evolved quite a bit since the Renaissance even if its political and economic system had not.

I have also run across people who think of Vico as a member of the Romantic movement. While his works influenced the Romantics, there was a substantial gap between his intellectual activity and that influence. It took a while for his works to be recognized outside of Naples and Venice. Martina Piperno's remarkable study, *Rebuilding Post-Revolutionary Italy: Leopardi and Vico's 'New Science,'* traces the influence Vico had on Italy at the end of the eighteenth century through the Risorgimento. She discusses the way his ideas were promoted by Vincenzo Cuoco (1770–1823), who made him a symbol of Italian thought. She then shows how Vico's theory of poetry influenced Giacomo Leopardi, Ugo Foscolo, and others working in Italy.³³ Outside of Italy, Melchiorre Cesarotti (1730–1808) was largely responsible for bringing attention to Vico's theory of poetry. In 1795, Frederick August Wolf published the *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, in which he argued that Homer was not one author but an oral tradition. Because Vico's texts were not heavily circulated, Wolf did not realize that the *New Science* had made this argument

much earlier. It was not until 1807 that Cesarotti demonstrated to Wolf that Vico had first held this position.³⁴ It was at this point that Romantics like Samuel Taylor Coleridge were influenced by Vico's writings.³⁵

I present this chronology to emphasize the chronological distance between Vico and the Renaissance and Romantic movements. This highlights his place in the early modern period, which thought of the Renaissance as a distant memory and had yet to anticipate substantially the Romantics. The next question is, where did Vico sit geographically?

In his *Autobiography*, he never mentions traveling outside the province of Naples. Nevertheless, the major works of seventeenth-century philosophy made it to Naples despite the inquisition.³⁶ More importantly, Naples was a center of Enlightenment thought. If there was an upside to the feudal control of Naples and the absence of commerce, it was that the study of law became the main road to the middle class. A large number of law students became interested in philosophy and science. While the Neapolitan Enlightenment is not nearly as famous as the Scottish Enlightenment, it did not lack for intellectual talent. The poetic theory of Gianvincenzo Gravina (1664–1718) actually had more influence in Europe in the eighteenth century than Vico. Pietro Giannone (1676–1748) wrote an important history of Naples that was highly critical of church influence.

While Vico did not gain the European attention he had hoped for, he was considered a prominent thinker in Naples, as demonstrated by the interest his works generated. In 1744, Damiano Romano published *L'origine della giurisprudenza romana contro alla moderna opinione del Signor D. Gio. Battista Vico* in which he took issue with Vico's claim, among other things, that Roman law developed independently of the Twelve Tables of Athens.³⁷ Koen Stapelboeck discusses how Vico had an influence on the Neapolitan debate about the value of commerce through the writings of Carlantontio Broggia, who defended his traditional view. Ferdinando Galiani published his early work *Della moneta* in 1751 as a response to Broggia.³⁸ In 1768, G. F. Finetti published a work defending the Roman Catholic view of the origin of humanity against Vico's account of the state of nature and the pagan origin of religion.³⁹ Vico was ingrained in the intellectual culture of Naples in the eighteenth century.

The Neapolitan Enlightenment also produced a number of important thinkers in the generation after Vico. Antonio Genovesi (1713–1769) taught the first ever university course in political economics at the University of Naples in 1754.⁴⁰ In 1780, Gaetano Filangieri (1753–1788) started publishing *The Science of Legislation*, which included an extended critique of the feudal rule that was hampering Naples. His work acquired