Vico: Historical Mythology

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Authored by Frank Redmond, 2012

One of the principal aspects of Vico's New Science is the idea that mythology is sprung from actual historical events and the mythologies become debased over time only to arrive to us interwoven with allegory and metaphor. Vico frequently comes back to this idea when he needs to correct mistaken interpretations of myths by scholars of a later age, the so-called "conceit of scholars". Since myths are created by people, they must be based in historical reality.

Background

Vico states that the earliest humans developed the original mythology using a historical basis. The earliest people who created the historical myths were crude yet extremely creative people. They lived in isolated communities shut-off from other global events, but they developed the kernel of sophisticated culture nonetheless. These cultures are based in a poetic, that is creative, impulse from the earliest people. Vico marvels at the creative genius of these people and how they built their environments with limited external impulses. The world was built from the modifications of the early human mind and we still inhabit their world.

This is in contrast with our scientific modern world which has lost touch with the creative impulses of the earliest people. We live in the age of Descartes. To Vico, we now live in an age of barbarism, that is the barbarism of reflection. It is our age that has the kernel of destruction as we will eventually "burn out" from our own societies as they are unsustainable. We need to return to the kernel of civilization and the ingenuity of the first peoples to become immune to the barbarism of reflection.

The New Science is an attempt to decode the earliest people's ideas in order to understand ourselves better and turn away from the barbarism of reflection. The problem is that it is almost impossible for us in our age to understand the earliest peoples.

Myths Based in History

For Vico, myths like history itself were created by humans. The myths and fables of the earliest ages were precursors to the more rational histories of later ages. What Vico means by rational is not that our current discourse is more sophisticated just that it is more "logical" with an emphasis on the
aspect of logos. It is a different kind of logic. Today we have scientific logic; the earliest people had poetic logic in the sense of poetic meaning creative.

Vichean myths can be traced back to concrete historical events. For example, the god Neptune is born from the need for early people to explain the new found seas, the tempestuousness and vastness of the seas, after living in isolated inner-country cities. Neptune is an imaginative universal or divine archetype that was used to consolidate and deify the experience of the earliest people, an all-encompassing umbrella of all sea related experiences.

For the earliest age, these myths that were developed were severe in nature. By this I mean, they were a crude record of historical events driven by the creative impulse. These myths were given their content from whatever was familiar and at-hand. The content was the peoples' "own natures and the passions and habits" (220), and the material for myths comes from a very basic society with basic laws, if any laws, and simple attitudes. This is why it is so hard for the modern mind to penetrate these severe societies and their myths. We think much differently than they do. It's even doubtful if we can even understand their positions at all. However, it is essential to understand these people as the inhabit a world of creativity and vitality.

A similar sentiment, as pointed out by Vico via Eusebius, was that “The first theology of the Egyptians was simply a history interspersed with fables, to which later generations, growing ashamed of them, gradually attached mystical interpretations.” (222). It's sort of as if a whole people decided to translate their mythology into a completely different language and intersperse fable into the historical myths to make the myths part-fable, part-myths. And then these fable/myths were given mystical interpretations. So true history comes out the other end as a twisted and dyed fabric, not resembling the original fabric in the least.

I think Vico despairs of even discovering what the original myths mean. First our minds cannot grasp the true historical reality of the myth and the myth has become so convoluted that unwinding the myth is like untangling the Gordian Knot.

But that doesn't mean we should despair of finding the earliest histories. Knowing a little more about the creative impulses of the earliest people can provide an antidote to the current barbarism of reflection.