Coleridge and Vico: influence or theoretical affinity?

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REFERRING TO THE VICHIAN MASTERPIECE *La Scienza Nuova*, which he read in Italian, using the edition published in Milan in 1816, Coleridge wrote in a letter dated 16th may 1825:

> I am more and more delighted with G. B. Vico and if I had (which thank God's good grace I have not) the least drop of *Author's* blood in my veins, I should twenty times successively in the perusal of the first volume (I have not yet begun the second) have exclaimed '*Pereant qui ante nos nostra dixere*' ['May they perish who say our things before us']".[1]

1. *Philological evidence and theoretical affinities*

Considering the troubled history of the dissemination of Vichian ideas, just the fact that an English author read *La Scienza Nuova* in Italian, in 1825, is noteworthy. But if we consider the theoretical affinities existing between Coleridge's reflection about *dramatic illusion* and *poetic faith* and Vico's reflection upon *myth as a true narration* the interest is destined to increase. This paper, originating from this quote, attempts to shed some light on the complex relationship between two authors, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Giambattista Vico, particularly in relation to the theoretical affinities existing between Coleridge's reflection about *dramatic illusion* and *poetic faith* and Vico's reflection upon *myth as a true narration*.

Coleridge's well known characterization of poetic faith as a "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment"[2] introduces an intermediate state between the *perfect delusion* typical of an audience that considers real the fictional characters of a play, and the complete skepticism that characterize an audience that, on the contrary, is completely aware of the fictional status of a play. These extreme positions do not leave enough space for an intermediate position, which describes the state of the audience of a play as an *illusion*. Therefore the difference between *illusion* and *delusion* is based on the role which *awareness* plays in the process of fruition of an artistic object: when the spectator is *deluded*, he confuses what is real and what is not, like Cervantes' Don Quixote. When he is *illuded*, he *decides* to be deceived. Like in a make-believe game, he accepts, for a certain period of time, to consider real what he knows to be fictional.

Coleridge is neither the first, nor the least to distinguish between *illusion* and *delusion*: Kant, Mendelsohnn, Hume, Smith, just to name a few, all identified a

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[1] S.T. Coleridge, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by E.L. Griggs, 6 Vol., Clarendon Press, Oxford 1956-1971, V Vol., p. 454.

[2] S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, edited by J. Engell, W.J. Bate, 2 Vol., Princeton University Press, Princeton N.J 1985, II Vol., pp. 5-6.

similar conceptual distinction.[3] In Coleridge, however, the active role of the spectator assumes a new importance. It is audience's active participation in what we can call the *game of illusion* to guarantee an epistemological value to the fiction. If the spectator experiences passively the fiction, there is the risk that the *illusion* becomes *delusion*, that he confuses what is fictive with what is not. This happens, Coleridge says, when we confuse a marble peach with a real one, or a wax figure with a real person.[4] In these cases we are not *illuded* but *deluded*, and when we find out the trick the delusion ends without leaving any space for aesthetic pleasure. In these situations our emotive response to the fiction is the same response that we would have if we were in front of a real situation: we see a wax figure but we react as if we were in front of a real person. Illusion, on the contrary, possess a specific epistemological value, because it individuates a specific form of belief, a conscious acceptance of the peculiar *value of truth* owned by the fictive worlds. As a result, in Coleridge's theory of *dramatic illusion* emerges the attribution of a strong epistemological value to the concept of *probable*: in Coleridge's reflection what is probable is not, like it is in Descartes,[5] equated to what is *false*, but to something that is neither *true* nor *false* but *intermediate* between the two.

Such attention to the intermediate is also central in Vico, and provide a potential connection between the two authors. In *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione*, a work in which the Italian philosopher discusses what is the best way to educate young students, he wrote that "It is a positive fact that, just as knowledge originates in truth and error in falsity, so common sense arises from perceptions based on verisimilitude. Probabilities stand, as to speak, midway between truth and falsity, since things which most of the time are true, are only very seldom false".[6] Rejecting Descartes' connection of the *probable* with the *false*, Vico claims that the dimensions of social life, of politics, cannot be understood using a logic entirely based on maths, because human behaviour is not based on rationality alone. On the contrary, our conduct is often conditioned by passions and irrational beliefs: not on what is *true* but on what we *suppose* to be true. As a result, to understand and possibly influence human conduct, the dimension of *probable*, tightly bound to that of *common sense*, is central.

The already clear similarities between Vico and Coleridge are destined to increase if we consider *La scienza nuova*, where Vico, in the famous chapter entitled *Discovery of the True Homer*, unfolds his theory of *myth as true narration*.[7] The point is well known: with a genial intuition, Vico claims that the poetic shape of ancient mythology is not due to an attempt to embellish a tale originally conceived in prose. The metaphors and all the other figures of

[3] S.T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819: On Literature*, edited by R.A. Foakes, 2 Vol., Princeton University Press, Princeton N.J 1987, I vol., pp. liii-lxiv.

[4] Ivi., II, pp. 264-265.

[5] R. Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode et Essais*, in Id., *Œuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Mesnil-sur-l'Estrée 2009, 3 Voll., III vol., pp. 13-133, p. 86.

[6] G. Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, edited by E. Gianturco, Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 13.

[7] G. Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, translated by M.H. Fisch and T.G. Bergin, Cornell University Press, Ithaca-New York 1984, pp. 301-329.

speech that we can find in the Homeric poems are not, properly speaking, figures of speech, but natural forms of expression which reflect a way of thinking typical of the early stages of humanity. What are the main characteristics of this peculiar way of thinking?

Vico describes the men of the early stages of humanity as savages without any rational skill, but with a huge imaginative faculty. As they are not able to find out the cause of a variety of natural events, they use their imagination to conceptualize them. Connecting the term *poet* to the greek term *poiesis*, Vico claims that the early men were natural poets because they created their own truth through their imagination. Quoting a proposition taken from Tacito he says that *fingebant simul credebantque*, ('they make-believe and at the same time they believe').[8] They imagine, for example, that the thunder is a manifestation of a superhuman being. Yet, *at the same* time they believe in their imaginative creation because they do not have the possibility of developing a comparison. This is a central element, that allows us to focus an interesting meeting point between the Coleridgean and the Vichian reflection. As we have seen, the Coleridgean distinction between *delusion* and *illusion* is primarily based on the role that awareness plays in the process of artistic creation. If the awareness of the border which divides a fictive object from a real one is fundamental in the distinction between *illusion* and *delusion*, then is equally important the presence of something which allows us to distinguish a fictive object from a real one, something which allows us to make comparisons. "Without the comparing power" – Coleridge wrote – "any act of Judgement, whether affirmation or denial, is impossible".[9] It is exactly the possibility to operate a comparison that lacks to the Vichian early men.

The first humans do not adhere voluntarily to the fictions they create, as they do not have the possibility to understand the world in other ways. A powerful imagination is the only tool that they have to understand and describe their environment. As a result, their imaginative creations, the traces of which we can find in ancient mythology, are not conscious artistic products, but *imaginative universals*, the early, fantastic equivalent of our concepts. In conclusion, we can say that the first humans do not live in a state of *illusion* but in one of *delusion*.

Given the extract in which Coleridge quotes Vico, and given the theoretical affinities that I have tried to underline, it seems that we can individuate a strong and significant philological link between Coleridge and Vico. Unfortunately it is not so simple, as in 1825 Coleridge's reflection on the themes which I discussed in the first paragraph of this paper were already developed. As a result, it is impossible to affirm that the Vichian ideas *directly* influenced his theory of dramatic illusion, but at the same time is important to underline that Coleridge himself, in 1825, claims that Vico expressed ideas similar to his own. Further explorations of the insidious territory of indirect influences are needed. Considering that the Coleridge's culture is

[8] Ivi, p. 117.
[9] S.T. Coleridge, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, op. cit., IV Vol., p. 641.

fundamentally German, and that some German author, like Herder, presents important and well known theoretical affinities with Vico,[10] this area of interest is the first that need to be considered, searching for authors that have points in common with Vico and Coleridge. I found a common ground between the two authors in the debate about ancient myth and ancient mythology that took place between the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century in Göttingen. Indeed, taking into account some phases of Coleridge's intellectual development we can find an early acquaintance with themes and authors that can be defined as Vichian — in particular in relation to the study of myths and of *Sacred Books*, two matters that in this period are linked.

Many different scholars began a new type of study both of the Bible and of ancient mythology. The resulting philological analysis of the Bible brought them to the conclusion that the Book, though probably *inspired* by God, is not *revealed* by him. As an effect, even if the Bible maintained a preferential status compared with profane literature, it was no longer considered true word by word, because it is a human work, which as every human work, could contain mistakes. But if the Bible can be seen as a human product which alongside its message tells us something about the men who wrote it, then why can't we consider mythology in the same way?

The increasing diffusion of a philological approach to the study of the Bible brought with itself a new interest towards the ancient mythology, that begin to be seen not as a simple artistic product that belongs to a remote era, but as a document which gives important information about the world and the way of thinking of our ancestry. As a result the study of the Bible and that of ancient mythology, although not always connected, proceeds in parallel, each influencing the other. Even if in Vico we can't find an explicit application of his theory of myth as *true narration* to the Bible, which in Vico's work continues to maintain a preferential status, it's impossible to understand his interest in myth, and his famous theory of the *true Homer*, without taking into account this cultural phenomenon. As a result, to understand the Coleridge and Vico relationship, is important to take into account not only Coleridge's acquaintance with authors who studied ancient mythology, but also with the development of a historical approach to the Bible.

2. England

Before speaking about what we can call the Göttingen's school of mythology we have to come back to England, because Coleridge probably came in contact with this school in 1796, two years before he went to Germany.

[10] F. Tessitore, "Vico nelle origini dello storicismo tedesco", in *Bollettino del Centro di Studi Vichiani*, Vol. IX, 1979, pp. 5-34; V. Verra, *Linguaggio, mito e umanità in Vico e in Herder*, in *Omaggio a Vico*, edited by A. Corsano, Morano Editore, Napoli 1968, pp. 333-362; Aa. Vv. *Vico in Italia e in Germania. Letture e prospettive, Atti del Convegno Internazionale Napoli, 1-3 marzo 1990*, edited by G. Cacciatore e G. Cantillo, Bibliopolis, Napoli 1993; R.T. Clark, "Herder, Cesarotti and Vico", in *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Oct., 1947), pp. 645-671; E. Auerbach, *Vico e lo storicismo estetico*, in Id., *San Francesco Dante Vico ed altri saggi di filologia romanza*, De Donato Editore, Bari 1970, pp. 88-100, p. 97; E. Auerbach, *Vico e il Volksgeist*, in Id., *San Francesco Dante Vico ed altri saggi di filologia romanza*, op. cit., pp. 102-114, p. 102; G.A. Wells, *Vico and Herder*, in Aa. Vv., *Giambattista Vico. An International Symposium*, edited by G. Tagliacozzo, The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore 1969, pp. 93-102, p. 101.

Many scholars considered Coleridge's interest for the theme of myth *tardive*, connecting it mainly to the lecture *On the Prometheus of Aeschylus*.[11] While this lecture undoubtedly represents the most explicit and direct treatment of this theme by Coleridge, it can be considered as the landing place of a long journey, which started when the poet was still studying in Cambridge. During this period Coleridge was immersed in the Unitarian movement represented by scholars as Joseph Priestley, William Frend, Gilbert Wakefield and John Prior Estlin, as his correspondence with them clearly testify.[12]

The Unitarian movement was based on the rejection of Trinitarianism and on the understanding of God as one person. Trinitarian doctrine is seen by the Unitarians as a misinterpretation of the Bible, where there isn't, according to them, any reference to the trinitarian doctrine. In order to demonstrate this thesis, they undertake an analysis of the Bible which can be situated in the general process of critical analysis of the sacred literature started with La Peyrère and Spinoza. This analysis also shows the knowledge of the results of the so called Higher Criticism, a knowledge shared by Coleridge, who in 1796 borrowed from the Bristol Library a copy of Michaelis' *Introduction to the New Testament* and changed the destination of his planned travel in Germany from Jena to Göttingen.

In the second half of the Seventeenth century, in England, parallel to the study of the Bible developed by the Unitarians, the interest for the ancient mythology is testified not only by the incredible success of the Ossianic Poems, but also by the publication of two books which have a fundamental role in the Homeric Question: *An enquiry into the life and writings of Homer*, by Thomas Blackwell and *An Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer*, by Robert Wood.[13] Though differently, the two authors analyze the Homeric poems not as timeless poetic works, but as historical documents which give us valuable information about the men who wrote them.[14] But their innovative approach to the Homeric Question is not the only thing that is important for us. In spite of the fact that there isn't any evidence that show undoubtedly that Blackwell read Vico, there are elements which make probable that he at least had some knowledge of the Italian philosopher's work. Blackwell's tutor, Sir John Clerk, studied in Rome, and was an active promoter of the Italian culture,[15] and Richard Mead, a doctor whom Blackwell frequented, not only was another active promoter of the Italian culture in England, but also possessed a rich

[11] S.T. Coleridge, *On the Prometheus of Aeschylus*, in S.T. Coleridge, *Shorter Works and Fragments*, edited by H.J. Jackson & J.R.de J. Jackson, 2 Voll., Princeton University Press, Princeton N.J. 1995, II Vol., pp. 1251-1301.

[12] See D. Hedley, *Coleridge, Philosophy and religion: Aids to reflection and the Mirror of Spirit*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 50-58.

[13] T. Blackwell, *An enquiry into the life and writings of Homer* (1735), Scolar Press, Menston, 1972; R. Wood, *An Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer: With a Comparative View of The Ancient and Present State ot the Troade* (1769), H. Hughs, London 1875.

[14] See K. Simonsuuri, *Homer's Original Genius. Eigtheenth-Century Notions of the Early Greek Epic*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-London-New York Melbourne 1979; L. Ferreri, *La questione omerica dal Cinquecento al Settecento*, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, Roma 2007, pp. 199-200; D.M. Foerster, *Homer in English Criticism. The Historical Approach in the Eighteenth Century*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1947, pp. 124-126.

[15] See G. Costa, *La Critica Omerica di Thomas Blackwell (1701-1757)*, Sansoni, Firenze 1958, pp. 4, 12-13.

library, where there was a copy of the *Scienza Nuova.*[16]

Though it is impossible to prove undoubtedly that Blackwell knew Vico, it is worth noting that both Blackwell and Wood present a reflection that have many similarities to Vico's reflection, in particular regarding the Homeric Question, namely the idea that the first men were lacking rational skills but rich in imagination; a historicist approach to the study of mythology; the idea that human history is not based on isolated persons because is possible to identify something as the style of an epoch, of a community.[17] To trace the connection fully the question is: was Coleridge acquainted with Blackwell's and Wood's works? Once again it is impossible to give to this question an undoubtedly positive response. Both the *Enquiry* and the *Essay* were well known, as their many editions demonstrate, and it is probable that such a voracious reader as Coleridge read the books, but in his works there isn't any reference to the two authors. Although is impossible to prove that Coleridge knew directly the works of Blackwell and Wood is highly probable that he had an indirect knowledge of their theories, obtained during his period of study in Göttingen, where, in 1799, he knew Christian Gottlob Heyne.

3. Germany

Heyne, who knew and quoted both Blackwell and Wood,[18] gather different aspects of several scholars' reflection upon ancient mythology, building a complex and coherent new approach to the study of myth,[19] an approach which presents so many similarities with that of Vico that different scholars argue that the German classicist must have known the work of the Italian philosopher.[20] Although, once again, in Heyne's works there isnt't any quotation of Vico, there are many clues that suggest that the German author could have known the Italian one.

Heyne not only knew authors like Blackwell and Wood, who were probably influenced by Vico, but one of his students, Georg Zoega, after studying with him in Göttingen moved to Italy, where in 1788 he wrote an essay, entitled *Omero*, in which he quoted Vico.[21] Heyne had a long correspondence with Zoega.[22] Then it is probable that his student told him something about Vico.

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[16] Ivi, pp. 16-17.

[17] See G. Costa, "Thomas Blackwell tra Gravina e Vico", in *Bollettino del centro di studi vichiani*, Vol. V, 1975, pp. 40-55.

[18] C.G. Heyne, *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen*, I Band, 32 Stuck. Den 15 Marz 1770, pp. 257-270; see also A.H.L. Heeren, *Christian Gottlob Heyne: biographisch dargestellt*, J.F. Römer, Göttingen 1813, pp. 210-212; S. Fornaro, *I Greci senza lumi: l'antropologia della Grecia antica in Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729-1812) e nel suo tempo*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2004, pp. 126-129.

[19] M.M. Sassi, *La freddezza dello storico: Christian Gottlob Heyne*, in *Annuali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, Classe di Lettere e Filosofia, Serie III, Vol XVI, 1, Pisa 1986, pp. 105-126, p. 106; L. Marino, *I maestri della Germania: Göttingen 1770-1820***,** Einaudi, Torino 1975.

[20] G. D'alessandro, *L'infuenza di Vico in Heyne e nella scuola storico mitologica di Gottinga*, in Aa.Vv., *La filosofia pratica tra metafisica e antropologia nell'età di Wolff e Vico*, edited by G. Cacciatore, V. Gessa-Kurotschka, H. Poser, M. Sanna, Alfredo Guida Editore, Napoli 1999, pp. 157-204.

[21] G. Zoega, *Omero*, in *Strassburger Festschrift zur XLVI Versammlung Deuscher Philologen und Schulmänner*, herausgegeben von der Philosophischen Fakultät der Kaiser-Wilhelms-Universität, Verlag Von Karl J. Trübner, Strassburg 1901, pp. 3-10.

[22] F.G. Welcker, *Zoega's Leben (Sammlung seiner Briefe und Beurtheilung seiner Werke)*, Halle a. S. 1912-13, 2 Voll., II vol.; G. Zoega, *Briefe und Dokumente*, herausgabe von Ø. Andreasen, Munksgaard, 1967, I Vol.

Moreover, Heyne worked for many years as librarian of the Georgia Augusta library, where the copy of the *Scienza Nuova* was acquired in 1774. Heyne's work as librarian was very accurate: he increased the number of books from sixty thousand to two hundred thousand, and wrote seven thousand reviews. It would be very strange if he hadn't noticed the presence of a book that deals with a subject so close to his interests. Furthermore, Heyne worked in a University rich in connection with the English *British Society*, where *La scienza nuova* was quite well-known and he also spent time in Leipzig, where were published the *Acta Eruditorum*, a journal that dedicated a review to the *Scienza nuova* in 1727.

Besides these routes, through which Vico's reflection could have indirectly reached Coleridge, the stronger link between the two authors is a conceptual one.

Vico's reflection contains indeed lot of theoretical affinities with Heyne's reflection about myth: they both underline the rough and primitive character of the first men, and apply an historical approach to the study of ancient myth, considering them as a direct record of the way in which the early men perceived and conceptualized the world. There are also lot of lexical similarities between the two authors, who often use similar terms to describe similar concepts. A prime example is the use of the term *conversio*: both the authors use this term to describe the process through which the early men *conceptualize* the multiplicity. As they do not possess rational skills in order to manage with abstract concepts, they are not able to insert different singular objects and events in a single class. As a result they *convert* the multiplicity, the abstract, in a singular object that identify all the objects that possess similar characteristics,[23] becoming their *incarnation*, their *imaginative universal*. For the first men, in Vico's opinion, Achille is not an example of courage: he is *the courage itself*. Every man that does something brave, is not *like* Achille, *is* Achille. The way in which Heyne characterizes the process that allows the first men to grasp the multiplicity, lacking the power of abstraction, is very similar: the first men's speech "convertit ingeniorum vim ad substituenda concreta abstractis: convertuntur cogitata in facta" [uses the strength of intelligence to convert the abstract in the concrete; thoughts are converted into facts].[24]

To conclude our journey: after following the clues of the new approach to the study of myth brought us in Germany, let's go back to Coleridge. One conclusion we can draw is that it's impossible to prove, with the support of philological evidence, that Coleridge knew Vico before 1825. At the same time, it should be clear that, even though there isn't any textual element that proves his knowledge of Vico's work beyond doubt, Coleridge was well acquainted with Vichian themes from the early stage of his career. During the years he spent in Cambridge he participated to the Unitarian movement. Through his

[23] G. Vico, *Scienza Nuova* (1725), in Id., *Opere*, a cura di A. Battistini, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano, 2007, Book II, Chapter VI, § 484, pp. 631-632.

[24] C.G. Heyne, *Proluduntur nonnulla ad quaestionem de caussis fabularum seu mythorum veterum physicis* (1764), in *Opuscula Academica collecta et animadversionibus locupletata*, apud J.C. Dieterich, 6 Voll., Göttingen, 1785-1812, I. Vol., pp. 184-206, p. 192.

participation in the Unitarian movement Coleridge not only took an interest in Biblical studies and in mythology, but also got a glimpse of the Higher Criticism that he would later engage with directly during his period of study in Göttingen, where he worked with Heyne and followed Eichhorn lessons. Though Coleridge cannot be considered an anthropological thinker, his interest in myth appears in his complex reflection on the value of truth in different types of text: not only does he dedicate specific attention to the study of Bible, embracing the approach he learned from Heyne and Eichhorn, but with his theory of dramatic illusion he reflected on the peculiar value of truth of fictional texts. In *On the Prometheus of Aeschylus*, a lecture delivered in 1825, he finally deals with the theme of ancient myth directly, using a concept conceived by Heyne, that of *philosopheme*. In the same period in which he delivered the lecture about Prometheus, Coleridge was reading *La scienza nuova*, and starting from this period, we can find lot of notes about Vico and quotation from his works in Coleridge's notebooks. The English poet, for example, is stunned by Vico's *quattro autori* [four authors], Platone, Tacito, Bacone, and Grozio, even if he is surprised by the inclusion of Grozio,[25] and disappointed by Vico's decision to stop reading Grozio, whom *De Jure belli et Pacis* the Italian Author considers *opera di Autore Eretico* [a work by an heretic author].[26] Furthermore, he quotes a Vichian passage that he will use as the exergo of *Aids to Reflection*,[27] and the *Table Talk* is rich in references to Vico.[28]

In conclusion, although is impossible to prove that the English poet was influenced by the Vichian reflection in the early stage of his intellectual career, considering his background, his acquaintance with authors and themes that can be defined as Vichian, I think that the similarities between his theory of dramatic illusion and Vico's theory of myth as a true narration are not accidental, but represent an interesting but often ignored case of transmission of ideas.

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[25] «Yet Vico, though a Catholic, almost idolized the writings of Bucer and Grotius. But I fear that Vico inwardly regarded the Christian only as one of the various positive religions, the exemples of which he quotes». S.T. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, edited by H.J. Jackson & G. Whalley, 6 Voll., Princeton University Press, Princeton N.J. 1980-2001, VI vol., p. 18.

[26] S.T. Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, cit., IV Vol., 5204

[27] Ibidem.

[28] S.T. Coleridge, *Table Talk*, edited by K. Coburn & B. Winer, 2 Voll., Princeton University Press, Princeton N.J. 1990, I Vol., pp. 565-66; II Vol., p. 165; II Vol., p. 214.