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Résumé de l'article

Gianvincenzo Gravina (1664–1718) and Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) were two Neapolitan philosophers concerned with the way human society initially formed. They agreed that ancient myths were produced by a mentality that had a powerful ability for acute perception but could not reflect abstractly. They also agreed that wonder (*la maraviglia*) was an important force that enchanted the first peoples into founding society. They disagreed on how this happened. Gravina argued that early poets could see the truth and used persuasive poetry to teach the people how to live. Vico argued that wonder impelled the first poets to create false divinities that frightened the first bestial people into founding civilization. While the two views differ, they show how Neapolitan Enlightenment thinkers developed radically different answers to questions that Northern Europeans were asking.

Wonder, Politics, and the Founding of Civilizations in Gravina's *Della Ragione Poetica* and Vico's *Scienza Nuova*

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It may seem strange to think about wonder as a political force. Of course, we consider the political dimension of things so frequently these days that doing so would not be very surprising. Nevertheless, wonder is generally associated with fascination and enchantment. It is also connected to childhood. Because children have yet to understand the world, they can find wonder everywhere. As adults, we long to recapture the naivety of seeing the world through a child's eyes. Wonder has such positive connotations, why would we dirty it by connecting it to politics?

Nonetheless, some philosophers in eighteenth-century Naples did just that. They thought that wonder, considered as a political force, could answer, at least in part, an important philosophical question. If humans were originally animals that wandered in the wilderness and were only concerned with meeting their basic individual needs, how did they ever overcome their base nature to organize themselves into civilization? These Italians suggested that if these beasts had childlike ignorance, then they could have been enchanted and tamed by the forces of nature or even persuasive rhetoric. Wonder could have restrained their lustful passions enough to draw them into organized communities. Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) and Gianvincenzo Gravina (1664–1718) both argued that the development of a sort of poetic wisdom or mythical thought provided the moralizing force to

establish civil institutions. Wonder (*maraviglia*) is an essential element of their accounts.[1]

In this essay, I trace the role these authors ascribe to *maraviglia*. Both claim that Greek and Roman myths were generated by an alternate form of rationality. Vico calls this *sapienza poetica*, or poetic wisdom, while Gravina calls it *ragione poetica*, or poetic reason. By comparing their views, we can come to a better understanding of how these two contemporary authors approached the problem of human socialization that was so important in early modern political philosophy.

The similarities of Vico's and Gravina's positions on *maraviglia* shed light on two important areas of research. While recent work has been done on Vico's intellectual context, it has looked more at general political trends rather than at his relationships with particular contemporaries such as Gravina.[2] Vico's most original idea, as Donald Phillip Verene argues, is uncovering the existence of the imaginative universal as the epistemological basis for *sapienza poetica*.[3] While Gravina did not foresee Vico's insight, there are more similarities between their views than one might expect.[4] Moreover, there is a temptation to portray Vico as having developed his account of myth in relative isolation, but Gravina's writings show that he indeed worked in the context of a much larger conversation on myth, knowledge, and politics in Naples. I hope this essay will help to expand the investigation of influences on Vico's idea of myth.

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1. In contemporary Italian, *la maraviglia* is spelled *la meraviglia*. Since both authors preferred *la maraviglia*, I use the noun here with that spelling.

2. Substantial research on Vico and Gravina was conducted in the middle of the twentieth century but not specifically on poetic wisdom. For a comparison of their views on the passions, see Santino Caramella, "La poetica filosofica di G. V. Gravina e la logica poetica di G. B. Vico," *Studi graviniani* (1965): 281–98. For an analysis of their views on myth from Gravina's perspective, see Amedeo Quondam, *Cultura e ideologia di Gianvincenzo Gravina* (Milan: U. Mursia, 1968), 149–66. For a discussion of their shared Platonism, see Bruno Barillari, *Gianvincenzo Gravina come precursore del Vico* (Genoa: Società Anonima Editrice Dante Alighieri, 1942).

3. Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico's Science of the Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 33–34, 75–80.

4. Two recent works that compare their ideas on the imagination are Martina Piperno, *Rebuilding Post-Revolutionary Italy: Leopardi and Vico's "New Science,"* Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2018), 32–39, 101–3, and Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The New Map of the World: The Poetic Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 153–55.

More broadly, these two authors' views on wonder suggest that the Neapolitan Enlightenment generated alternate responses to the philosophical questions that were being discussed in Northern Europe. When considering the replacement of the medieval view of hierarchical politics by more democratic models, the problem of human sociability is uncovered. If bestial humans lacked reason and were built to survive independently from one another in the wilderness, what would have ever motivated them to subdue their passions and enter into civil society? Social contract theorists such as John Locke maintained that the first societies must have somehow formed by free choice regardless of the inability of pre-social humans to think rationally. Furthermore, social contract theory argues that governmental power stems from the consent of the people rather than directly from the monarch. Rational and free choice is essential for the establishment of a legitimate government.[5] While these theorists considered the need for rhetoric as a means of socialization, their emphasis was on the importance of consent—despite the animalistic nature of the first humans.[6] Conversely, Bernard Mandeville argued that the bestial humans were tamed through an organic process by which human desire for survival grew into an expanded sense of self-interest. By slowly recognizing the benefits of working together, early humans came to support and expand the institutions that subdued their passions.[7] This argument avoids the question of how beasts could have rationally consented, but then struggles to explain how governmental authority can be justified.

For Vico and Gravina, poetic wisdom presented a third alternative. Their arguments were based on the idea that imagination runs a course between instinct and rational choice. Myths were not the product of automatic stimulus response, but they also were not produced by reflective thought. They were ingenious narratives that flowed from the creative capacity of the first people. The myths created

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5. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1980), 55–57.

6. For a discussion of the role that socialization played in social contract theory, see Victoria Kahn, *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640–1674* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 8–15, 57–60.

7. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees and Other Writings*, ed. E. J. Hundert (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997); Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 268–80.

were so powerful and persuasive that they established rituals which controlled the passions of the members of the community. The first societies were authentic products of human invention, rather than just accidental developments.[8] Nevertheless, they were not rationally planned and chosen. Unlike other early modern explanations, this solution gives authorship of civilization to the first humans—even if they lacked the full capacity to think rationally.[9] I hope this study will help draw attention to the value of the Neapolitan Enlightenment as a source of alternative solutions to the prevailing problems discussed by early modern political philosophy.

The focus of this essay, however, will be on the authors' radically different presentations of myth making and human socialization. For both Vico and Gravina, wonder was the essential element that redirected human instinctual bestiality toward the restraint imposed by mythical religions. It provided the creative energy to bewitch the first people. The authors disagree, however, on how these initial acts of creativity worked. For Gravina, the first poets generated powerful narratives out of their ability to perceive and then represent truly great people and events. Vico argues the opposite: he asserts that the pagan gods were false divinities based on a misunderstanding of the natural world. Nevertheless, the rituals associated with those divinities had the persuasive force to restrain their own passions and the passions of their bestial followers. By examining this disagreement, I intend to show the sophistication of the Neapolitan response to the problem of human sociability and how the problems that fall from it differ from those in the Northern European tradition. I also hope to reveal how the political dimension of wonder may be more complex than one might anticipate. In this essay, I am going to rely strictly on writings dealing

8. For a discussion on how Vico's theory of myth emphasized agency, see Luca Tateo, "The Providence of Associated Minds: Agency in the Thought of Giambattista Vico and the Origins of Social and Cultural Psychology," in *Constraints of Agency: Explorations of Theory in Everyday Life*, ed. Craig W. Gruber, Matthew G. Clark, Sven Hroar Klempe, and Jaan Valsiner (Heidelberg: Springer, 2015), 31–44.

9. Albert O. Hirschman saw that Vico recognized that human selfishness drove people to socialization by transforming vice into virtue. But Hirschman did not see how human agency and imagination worked in Vico's *New Science*. He writes that in Vico's account, "we are left in the dark about the conditions under which that marvelous metamorphosis of destructive 'passions' into 'virtues' actually takes place." See Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013 [1977]), 17.

with poetic wisdom or reason. For Gravina, I will focus on *Delle antiche favole* [*Of Ancient Fables*] (1696) and *Della ragion poetica* [*Of Poetic Reason*] (1713).[10] For Vico, I will focus on the 1744 edition of *Principi di scienza nuova di Giambattista Vico d'intorno alla comune natura delle nazione* [*Principles of New Science of Giambattista Vico Concerning the Common Nature of the Nations*], which was his final revision of this edition, first published in 1730.[11]

Both authors also wrote extensively on the history of jurisprudence, but while Gravina seems to have kept these two aspects of his research separate, Vico's work is a more organic whole.[12] Vico claims he first realized the importance of poetic wisdom between 1722 and 1725, the year when he was writing the first edition of his *New Science*.[13] As Barbara Ann Naddeo elucidates, Vico maintains his earlier ideas of jurisprudence in the 1725 *New Science*.[14] While his first edition is certainly worthy of more study, between writing the 1725 and 1730 editions, Vico made a discovery that made his later edition of particular interest. He realized that the writings attributed to Homer were not

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10. Gianvincenzo Gravina, *Delle antiche favole* (Rome: Antonio de Rossi, 1696); Gianvincenzo Gravina, *Della ragion poetica*, 2 vols. (Rome: Francesco Gonzaga, 1713). Google Books makes these works freely available in digital format. All translations of *Delle antiche favole* are mine.

11. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico: Unabridged Translation of the Third Edition (1744) with the addition of "Practic of the New Science,"* trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984). When I cite the *New Science*, I always refer to this edition unless otherwise specified and I cite by paragraph numbers. To consult the original text in Italian, see Giambattista Vico, *Opere*, ed. Andrea Battistini (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1990).

12. Gianvincenzo Gravina, *Originum juris civilis libri tres* (Naples: F. Mosca, 1713); and in a contemporary edition: Gianvincenzo Gravina, *Originum juris civilis libri tres*, ed. Fabrizio Lomonaco, 2 vols. (Naples: Liguori, 2005). Giambattista Vico, *Opere giuridiche: il diritto universale*, ed. Paolo Cristofolini (Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1974). For a summary of Gravina's view on jurisprudence, see Carla San Mauro, *Gianvincenzo Gravina giurista e politico* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2006), 86–103.

13. Giambattista Vico, *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 166–67. Vico dedicates Book III of the first *New Science* to interpreting poetic wisdom. He identifies the importance of this concept and introduces the idea of poetic characters at the start of this book, although he revises this part in the 1730 edition. See Giambattista Vico, *The First New Science*, ed. and trans. Leon Pompa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), par. 248–64.

14. Barbara Ann Naddeo, *Vico and Naples: The Urban Origins of Modern Social Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 180–87.

composed by an individual but instead were the product of an entire oral tradition.[15] This led him to think of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as a general representation of ancient Greek culture. While Homer's writings were pivotal for both authors, this discovery drastically separated Vico's position from Gravina's more typical view. Since I am primarily focused on the difference between these two views, I will rely exclusively on the 1744 *New Science*.

Before diving into an examination of these texts, it will be helpful to discuss briefly the shared background of the authors. Although they knew each other, they rarely refer to each other's works. Gravina studied jurisprudence at the University of Naples four years before Vico. He left Naples for Rome in 1689, where he would help to found the *Accademia dell'Arcadia* and become a professor at the University of La Sapienza.[16] In his autobiography, Vico claims that Gravina read his *Life of Antonio Caraffa* in 1716, which earned him his "esteem and friendship"; he moreover asserts that they "carried on an intimate correspondence as long as Gravina lived."[17] Unfortunately, however, this would only amount to two years. It is indeed intriguing that Vico declares that this particular text drew Gravina's attention. One would think that Gravina would be interested in Vico's *On the Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* or his *On the Study Methods of Our Time* because they deal directly with topics such as ancient thought, rhetoric, and poetry. Vico's biography of a general in the Austrian army would have generated less interest. It is important to note that Vico lies about his birth year in his *Autobiography*. Given that censorship was an issue in Naples, there is reason to think the wrong birth year might be a signal that one should not take everything in the *Autobiography* literally.[18] It is possible that

15. Vico, *The New Science*, 6. See also B.A. Haddock, "Vico's 'Discovery of the True Homer': A Case-Study in Historical Reconstruction," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1979): 583–602.

16. San Mauro, *Gianvincenzo Gravina giurista e politico*, 27–36.

17. *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, 154.

18. Vico misreporting his birthyear is recorded in various editions of his autobiography; for example, *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, 215 and also *Opere*, 1242. There are a variety of interpretations of this error. See, for example, Donald Phillip Verene, *The New Art of Autobiography: An Essay on the Life of Giambattista Vico Written by Himself* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 165 and Mazzotta, *The New Map of the World*, 23.

Gravina's interest went beyond Vico's biography of Caraffa and even that their relationship was deeper than the latter author suggests.

Gravina did run afoul of the censors. In his anonymously published work *Hydra Mystica*, he associates himself with the *luminosi*, or philosophers of light, who were connected to Jansenism.[19] This position holds that the road to truth comes through the direct illumination of Christ rather than through nature. This is contrary to the Thomistic view that through understanding the natural world one can gain insight into its creator. According to Nicola Badaloni, there is evidence that advocates of this position were persecuted in Italy.[20] Vico's own connection to the *luminosi* is unclear, but he, too, came under the scrutiny of the censors.[21] He reveals in his *Autobiography* that he originally wrote his *New Science* in what he called a "negative form of expression."[22] In other words, he made his case by finding fault in the positions of others—possibly including Gravina—rather than presenting and defending his own position directly. Unfortunately, it would have been too expensive to publish this version; he resolved to write the text as it appears in the 1725 edition by presenting his ideas directly since, if nothing else, it would be shorter. Given that we have already seen evidence inciting us to not always trust Vico's autobiography, it bears consideration that perhaps the early edition was also censored. This gives us reason to think that Vico's reluctance to refer to Gravina directly is not because the latter's work did not interest him. It is, at this point, impossible to know if Vico's reference to Gravina's friendship is supposed to be code for a deeper philosophical commitment to his works. Regardless of their personal relationship, I think a comparison of the texts will reveal an important dimension to Vico's project.

While those relying on more traditional texts in social contract theory may think it unusual to include myth in a discussion of the state

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19. Gianvincenzo Gravina, *Hydra mystica con la ristampa della traduzione italiana del 1761*, ed. Fabrizio Lomonaco (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2002).

20. Nicola Badaloni, *Introduzione a G. B. Vico* (Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 1961), 237.

21. For a discussion of Vico's relationship with the censors for his later edition of the *New Science*, see Gustavo Costa, "Perché Vico pubblicò un capolavoro incompiuto? Considerazioni in margine a *La Scienza Nuova*, 1730," *Italica* 82, nos. 3–4 (2005): 560–79.

22. *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, 166.

of nature, it was not considered curious at all to do just that in Italy.[23] Giovanna Ceserani discusses the influence that Greek archeological findings in Southern Italy had on Vico.[24] Many Italian authors, including Pietro Giannone and Ludovico Muratori, wrote histories of ancient and medieval Italy.[25] What makes Gravina's and Vico's approach to myth remarkable was their shared perspective that it was a product of a radically different worldview. It may have been the entry of the Cartesian method into Naples that inspired this discovery.

The idea that a ruler could use rhetoric—and even wonder—to instill morality in the masses was not original to Naples and Gravina's time; it actually dates back at least as far as Aristotle and the Greek civilization. René Descartes' ideas radically changed the discussion of rhetoric in Italy and his writings brought into question the value of the study of this subject as a discipline.[26] One response to this view argued that the legacy of myth was essential for communication and socialization. This justified the examination of myth as an entire worldview, which then needed to be studied as part of rhetoric. In this way, the encroachment of Cartesian thought highlighted the need for the study of myth.

Cartesian thought also had a profound influence on the study of jurisprudence in Naples. Traditionally, the ancients had held that laws should be composed generally and then adapted to particular circumstances. Descartes' new method called for absolute clarity. In jurisprudence, this meant that laws had to be written and enforced in a stringent manner. In Naples, this Cartesian call for rigour became a way to reform a legal system that had become desperately outdated. Reformers, including Francesco d'Andrea who was the teacher of

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23. While Vico is sometimes portrayed as a lone defender of ancient wisdom in Italy, the ancient/modern debate was also important in late seventeenth-century France. On the French context, see Larry F. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 30–31.

24. Giovanna Ceserani, *Italy's Lost Greece: Magna Graecia and the Making of Modern Archeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 46–49.

25. Giuseppe Giarrizzo, *Vico, la politica e la storia* (Naples: Guida Editori, 1981), 1–41.

26. Critics have written profusely on Vico and rhetoric. For an examination of how his view relates to that of his contemporaries in relation to Cartesianism, see Catherine L. Hobbs, *Rhetoric on the Margins of Modernity: Vico, Condillac, Monboddo* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002).

Gravina and Vico, saw Descartes' call for certainty as a justification for clarifying and revising the penal code.[27] Opponents of the new Cartesian thought were not necessarily defenders of the ancient system, but they nevertheless wanted to maintain the traditional idea that the law needed to be adapted to varying circumstances. Vico and Gravina were on opposite sides of this debate, which led them to form different ideas about myth and wonder.

In *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, Vico spells out his famous *verum-factum* principle, which claims that humans can know only what they make, in turn suggesting that the civil world rather than the natural world should be the object of science.[28] In *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, he critiques Descartes' method, arguing that it sets an unreasonable standard of certainty for knowledge of truth; he claims that students should learn the ancient method of probability so that they will be more practically suited for living in the world.[29] These two angles come together in the method of the *New Science*.

Vico explains in the *New Science* that his method relies on a combination of philosophical theory and philological evidence to demonstrate his claims. This is not unusual for any empiricist approach. Yet, the full extent of his anti-Cartesian position is revealed when he emphasizes the need for the engagement of the reader to bring these two together. He presents a chronological table of historical events, followed by a list of philosophical axioms, and he calls for the reader to bring the two parts together.[30] He stresses that the reader must find the truth within the modifications of one's own mind and that one

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27. John D. Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 51–54. Badaloni gives an extended account of the debate over probability in Naples. See Badoloni, *Introduzione a G. B. Vico*, 157–162, 199–202.

28. Giambattista Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language*, trans. L. M. Palmer (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 45–47.

29. Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, trans. Elio Gianturco (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 13–15.

30. The Chronological Table and its description are found at the opening of Book I. The second section entitled "Elements" contains the philosophical axioms. In both the opening of that section and the opening of the section on principles, Vico alludes to the need to fit these two sources of evidence together. See Vico, *The New Science*, 119, 330.

must narrate the ideal eternal history.[31] He turns to Francis Bacon's method of "think [and] see" as a way of suggesting an imaginative way of using inductive reasoning rather than strict abstract reasoning.[32] While Vico's anti-Cartesianism is sometimes overstated, his method calls for an imaginative engagement that harkens back to his call for the study of probability in *On the Study Methods of Our Time*.[33]

As a philosopher of light, Gravina rejects Vico's approach. In *Hydra Mystica*, he argues that the natural world is so separate from the divine world that it actually draws us away from true insight.[34] Through the miracles of Christ, the light of truth is revealed. He further argues against the value of probability. *Hydra Mystica* is written as a dialogue between *Casistica* and *Eresia*, who spell out a plan to corrupt and mislead humanity. *Casistica* argues that teaching the people to value probabilistic reasoning will shake their dedication to truth and steer them towards error.[35] It will also cause great social disorder, and ultimately, it will destroy the reign of Christ as people learn to bend the laws to their own advantage.[36] Hence, Vico and Gravina were on opposite sides of the debate over the new Cartesian method. While they shared a profound interest in myth, this methodological difference shaped their radically different views on wonder and poetic reason.

Gravina's interpretation of myth initially had more influence than Vico's.[37] Both thinkers asserted that the ancient authors were geniuses. To defend this claim, however, they had to account for the crudeness of ancient writings. Neither wanted to say the ancients were simply naïve or unsophisticated. Instead, they both suggested that the crudeness was actually an indication of a different type of wisdom that moderns struggle to grasp. For both thinkers, Homer is the paradigm

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31. Ibid., 349.

32. Ibid., 163, 359.

33. Vico was positively influenced by the Cartesianism of Nicolas Malebranche. For a link between the two philosophers, see Paolo Fabiani, *La filosofia dell'immaginazione in Vico e Malebranche* (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2002).

34. Gravina, *Hydra mystica con la ristampa della traduzione italiana del 1761*, 209. See also Badaloni, *Introduzione a G. B. Vico*, 239–40.

35. Gravina, *Hydra mystica con la ristampa della traduzione italiana del 1761*, 230–31.

36. Ibid., 235–36.

37. For the importance of Gravina's discovery of this form of thought and its influence in Europe, see J. G. Robertson, *Studies in the Genesis of Romantic Theory in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), 29–31.

for understanding this wisdom. He represents the culmination of the ancient poetic mentality—one that would later be pushed aside by philosophical thinking.

Poetic wisdom derived its strength from a powerful faculty of sensation and imagination that was unencumbered by the capacity for abstract thought. Since the first poets did not have the reflective capacity to form abstract concepts, they were not distracted by them. Instead, they were able to forcefully and passionately sense the objects and physical forces in the world around them. They could then use their imaginations to recall and represent those sensations in powerful images. Their writings appear crude to us because we expect more conceptual discussions. In order to penetrate the Homeric way of thinking, we need to bracket our rational ability and try to use our imaginations as they did.[38] If we do this, we can understand that poetic thought does not use the same criteria as modern, reflective, conceptual thought. Poetic thought uses keen sense perception and a powerful memory to determine which ideas are true and reasonable.

Gravina argues that because mythic thinkers could not develop philosophical concepts, they had to rely exclusively on sense perception. In *Delle antiche favole*, Gravina writes: "To the vulgar minds, which were almost completely surrounded by the haze (*caligini*) of the imagination (*fantasia*), the gateway to the precise knowledge of true and universal cognition is closed."[39] For Gravina, however, this was not entirely a bad thing, because it made their perceptions exceptionally acute. He pertinently observed: "When ideas take on the appearances of corporeal things, they find a way to enter into vulgar minds since they are able to follow the paths marked by sensible objects, and, in this way, the sciences can satisfy them with their fruits even though

38. For a recent account of Vico's discussion of this form of thought, see Jacques Chabot, *Giambattista Vico: la raison du mythe* (Aix-en-Provence: Édisud, 2005). For an account of how poetic wisdom differs from modern philosophical reasoning, see Verene, *Vico's Science of the Imagination*, 73–77. See also, Vittorio Hösle, *Vico's New Science of the Intersubjective World*, trans. Francis Russell Hittinger IV (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 98–101.

39. "Nelle menti vulgari, che sono quasi d'ogni parte involte tra le caligini della fantasia, è chiusa l'entrata agli eccitamenti del vero, e delle cognizioni universali" (Gravina, *Delle antiche favole*, 28). He repeats this phrase in *Della ragion poetica*, 20.

their minds are coarse."[40] Similarly, Vico emphasizes that it is difficult for us to comprehend the mentality of the theological poets because they lacked the ability to abstract and "they were entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, buried in the body."[41] Vico explicitly argues that we should not be prideful and assume that the ancients were trying to use a primitive version of contemporary rationality.[42] Thus, Vico and Gravina share an important starting point for considering poetic wisdom, but from there they head toward opposite conclusions.

In *Delle antiche favole*, Gravina argues that the inability of the first poets to abstract put them in a special position to see truth in the material world. His argument will sound familiar to anyone who thinks about how poetry, painting, or film can present the ordinary world in a more authentic way than routine experience does. Gravina opens *Delle antiche favole* with the empirical claim that to know something requires a clear and complete sensation of an object. The sense data must be free from anything that would obscure the object or cause confusion about it. He remarks: "If as the affirmation of an object contains the perception of the object, so the negation of the object contains perceptions from which the object is excluded and negated, and this false opinion, in as much as it is false, includes nothing positive but instead is a foolish perception from which the mind cannot lift itself except by encountering the object itself and having a complete perception of it."[43] This claim is in accord with his position as a philosopher of light and his adherence to Cartesian certainty. In a way that was different from the philosophers', the ancient poets could use acute perception to have a clear idea of an object. This claim provides the fundamental ground for Gravina's defense of ancient poetry. Since that

40. "Quando le contemplazioni avranno assunto sembianza corporea, allora troveranno l'entrata nelle menti vulgari, potendo incamminarsi per le vie segnate dalle cose sensibili: ed in tal modo le scienze pasceranno dei frutti loro anche i piu rozzi cervelli" (Gravina, *Delle antiche favole*, 28–29).

41. Vico, *The New Science*, 378.

42. Ibid., 122–23.

43. "Si come l'affermazione contiene percezione della cosa, che si afferma, così la negazione contiene percezione, dalla quale si esclude la cosa, che si niega, e l'opinion falsa, in quanto falsa, nulla di positivo comprende, ma è percezione scema, da cui la mente non si svelle, se non coll'incontro, e con la percezione dell'intero" (Gravina, *Delle antiche favole*, 10).

poetry is based upon the direct and unclouded perception of objects, it will be grounded in truth. The inability to abstract decreases the possibility of confusion with false ideas. This, then, becomes the basis for Gravina's claims about the positive moral influence of ancient myth.

Gravina's defense has a fairly obvious challenge. The *Odyssey* contains descriptions of gods, monsters, and other elements that could not have come from sense data. Given that there never had been actual cyclopes or sirens, how could these poems be true depictions of sense data? Gravina's response reveals why he established the criterion of truth the way he did. In his view, for an error to occur, some other idea or sensation has to eclipse a part of the original object. A poet could not simply replace one object with another and still present the object truthfully. Nevertheless, there is room for a poet to embellish a sensation in a manner that makes it accessible without obscuring its completeness. This imaginative work creates a more truthful presentation of objects than ordinary perception allows.

Great ancient poets dressed objects in a way that the masses could grasp despite their lack of sophistication. They added emotional energy to images that helped draw the attention of the first people but did not obscure the truth. Gravina writes that "poetry, with living representations and images that give incisive representations of the true, enclose everything within our imagination, and hold distant from us the images of those things that are contrary and that could confound the reality which the poet expresses."[44] The poets' representations are not literal, but lively—and therefore, they are more truthful than raw acts of mimesis. This allows, for example, poets to give meaning to objects that are distant in time and space. The virtuous heroes of the epic poems would not be immediately relevant to the audience of the poets. The poets used the imagery of gods and monsters to enliven the stories which led the audience to see the important truth which was the nature of moral virtue. By adding energy to the object, the audience can grasp the truth of the object, regardless of temporal separation.[45]

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44. In the original Italian: "la poesia con la rappresentazion viva, e con la sembianza, ed efficace similitudine del vero, circonda d'ogn'intorno la fantasia nostra, e tien da lei discoste l'immagini delle cose contrarie, e che confutano la realità di quello, che dal poeta s'esprime" (ibid., 11-12).

45. Ibid., 11.

Gravina understands that he is holding a challenging position. He admits fully that the fables of the ancient poets were indeed fake (*finto*) in the sense that they were not literal representations of truth. They employed a form of sensory deception, or trickery, but in a way that taught true ideas to the masses. For Gravina, this was not limited to metaphysical or theological truth. Gravina goes so far as to claim that the ancient poets actually used myth to teach scientific truth to the masses. Because they had such acute perception, the first poets were able to see real causal relationships between objects, which they then described mythically. As a result, "a large array of idols was produced that described the causes and intricate motions of nature."[46] Gravina makes the following claim: "In this way, they [the first people] saw the first reasonings and the seeds of science and the true world portrayed in the fake (*finto*) and yet completely real work of fairy tales, around which, as a source of profound doctrine, they increased the number of lovers of wisdom."[47] On one level, his view is not that surprising since many have claimed that the early myths were primitive scientific explanations of natural events. What is surprising is that Gravina holds that these ancient scientific explanations were indeed accurate when interpreted correctly and could even be considered the birth of scientific thought.

Gravina's main point, however, was that these myths taught the first people how to be moral. The foundation of his argument for this can be seen in his defense of Homer. He recognizes that ancient philosophers—for example, Plato and Aristotle—criticized Homer for describing things in too simplistic a fashion. Turning this around, Gravina accuses those philosophers of analyzing the world in such an abstract way that their analyses lose their connection to the world. He argues that when you compare the philosophers' descriptions with the sensed world, you realize that nothing of the real and true object remains. He calls this "the tomb of eloquence."[48] Homer, on the other hand, not

46. In Gravina's words: "perciò fu propagata una larga schiera di numi, sotto l'immagini de' quali furono anche espresse le cagioni, e moti intrinseci della natura" (ibid., 32).

47. "In questa maniera si videro le prime cagioni, e i semi delle scienze, ed il mondo vero, ritratto su'l finto, e tutto il reale impresso su'l favoloso: intorno al quale, come a fonte di profonda dottrina, s'aggiravano gli amatori della sapienza" (ibid., 43).

48. In the original: "la tomba dell'eloquenza" (ibid., 20).

only presents a true representation of human morality, he does so in a way that the ancient minds could understand.

The moral value found in ancient poetry comes from its depiction of historical figures in ways that do not portray them as entirely good or bad.[49] Gravina claims that Homer wrote for the mentality of the day, and that he described people realistically as having a rich variety of emotional responses. Homer described the heroes without "the elegant clothing (*porpora*), and the crown, and without the chlamys (*clamide*), and the regal robes (*ostro*) that conceal human weakness in the eyes of vulgar minds."[50] Homer does not give the clear definition of virtue that the philosophers provide; by portraying humans realistically, however, he shows people how to live in a virtuous manner while taking into consideration the complexity of human passion. He does present heroes performing cruel acts, but he also shows them doing great deeds. This complex depiction helps people see how to confront the bad within themselves in order to achieve goodness. Homer presented these heroes in a way that the masses, especially the first people, could understand.

This means that the ancient myths, for example that of Tantalus, carried important moral messages that actually inspired virtue.[51] The powerful images Homer created did not just teach the nature of virtue, but evoked the desire in the people to become moral. Gravina observes that "the myth is the existence of things transformed into the human sphere and is the truth clothed in the popular appearance: this is because the poet gives body to concepts and, with a senseless energy and a spirit wrapped entirely in the body, converts the ideas excited by philosophy into visible images."[52] The tales of Homer "introduce into popular consciousness the laws of nature and God, and excite the seeds of religion and honesty."[53] The strength of these poems consists in their

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49. Ibid., 23.

50. The "senza porpora, e corona, e senza la clamide, e l'ostro, che coprivano agli occhi popolari l'umana debolezza" (ibid., 25).

51. Ibid., 30.

52. "Per lo che la favola è l'esser delle cose, trasformato in geni umani, ed è la verità travestita in sembianza popolare: perché il poeta dà corpo ai concetti, e con animar l'insensato, ed avvolger di corpo lo spirito, converte in immagini visibili le contemplazioni eccitate dalla filosofia" (ibid., 39).

53. As Gravina writes, "s'introducono negli animi populari le leggi della natura, e di Dio, e s'eccitano i semi della religione, e dell'onesto" (ibid., 44).

grounding in true perceptions and the skill with which they lead people to living well.

Gravina pushes this beyond science and morality into politics. Homer also included the workings of civil government in his teaching. To this effect Gravina makes the following statement: "And who under the guidance of these principles fixes their eyes on the *Iliad*, that person will glimpse all the customs of men, all the laws of nature, all the workings (*ordigni*) of civil government, and universally all the existence of things, appearing in masks, under the representation of the Trojan War that was the canvas on which he wanted to embed his wonderful (*maraviglioso*) artwork."[54] Homer helped to maintain an ordered society through his dramatic portrayal of political acts.

What is the role of wonder (*maraviglia*) in Gravina's account? As discussed from the outset, to know an object it is necessary to have a complete sensation of it that is not eclipsed by something else. When an object lies buried in the flux of ordinary life, one does not notice it clearly and distinctly, and so one does not see the truth in it. Gravina draws an analogy with sight. One cannot see if light rays are not focused into one point. Similarly, the imagination cannot centre on an object if its attention is not fixed on it through a sense of novelty and wonder. What the ancient poets did was provide that wonder. According to Gravina, "when the object is accompanied by novelty, it moves us wonderfully (*a maraviglia*) and with this force it distances the mind from other images, drawing the object together in one so that the intellect recognizes in this body, accompanied by novelty, many new properties that were earlier obscured."[55] He summarizes his point by saying that "human and natural things when exposed to the senses flee from our reflection, so there is the need to spread (*sparger*) above them the colours of novelty, which excites wonder (*maraviglia*) and limits our

54. "E chi sotto la scorta di questi principi fisserà gli occhi nell'Iliade, scorgerà tutti i costumi degli uomini, tutte le leggi della natura, tutti gli ordigni del governo civile, ed universalmente tutto l'essere delle cose, comparire in maschera, sotto la rappresentazione della guerra Troiana, che fu la tela, su la quale ei vole imprimere sì maraviglioso ricamo" (ibid., 42).

55. In Gravina's words: "quando l'oggetto è accompagnato dalla novità, ci muove a maraviglia, e con l'istessa forza distacca la mente dall'altre immagini, traendola tutta ad una sola, per lo che l'intelletto ravvisa nel corpo accompagnato da novità molte proprietà, che prima trascurava" (ibid., 47).

particular reflection on popular and sensible things."[56] Wonder focuses our minds so that we can see the truth.

Gravina contends that this sense of wonder produces both thought and action. In his mind, the ancient poets' strongest ability was to inspire greatness by giving objects a novel sense of wonder. This made the goals of excellence and virtue both understandable and desirable. He describes this novelty as "moving with wonder (*movendo maraviglia*)" so that "it spurs the mind by these images in order to perform actions and have more lively reflections."[57] In this way the great poets took mediocre and humble minds and turn them into geniuses.[58]

Gravina's position is difficult to accept when one actually reads the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Vico, himself, had a difficult time accepting the idea that these works teach any sort of contemporary perspective on moral virtue.[59] Gravina's work analyzes the details of Homer's texts to reveal the insights that are obscured by our rational minds. While these stories look foolish to us, they were written for the vulgar masses centuries ago. While Gravina's extended analysis may be problematic, it is grounded in an important insight. If one starts from the idea that the first form of thought is completely embodied, then it would make sense that the images drawn from it would be authentic, in that they would have a firm connection to the physical world. An artist could then use the sense of wonder to help teach that truth and inspire moral behaviour. This part of his view seems fairly straightforward. Nevertheless, despite sharing many of Gravina's insights into poetic reason, Vico disputes this conclusion. He denies the insightfulness of poetic wisdom and yet does not deny that it is an alternate form of rationality that has value. His view includes a much different role for wonder.

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56. In the original: "le cose umane, e le naturali, esposte ai sensi, sfuggono dalla nostra riflessione, perciò bisogna sparger sopra di loro il colore di novità, la quale ecciti maraviglia, e riduca la nostra riflessione particolare sopra le cose popolari, e sensibili" (ibid., 47–48).

57. According to Gravina: "spronano la mente su quell'immagine, in modo che possa fare azione, e riflessione piu viva" (ibid., 48–49).

58. Ibid., 53.

59. As an example, Vico points to the fact that Achilles is deeply angered at having Briseis taken from him yet is not portrayed as actually feeling her loss. Similarly, Menelaeus does not show "amorous passion" for losing Helen. See Vico, *The New Science*, 708.

We cannot know the extent to which Vico was still thinking about Gravina's works in 1730. Nevertheless, his view separates from Gravina's when he presents his account of the development of language. Both thinkers agreed that the first form of thought was embodied, and so they both held that the first languages were physical representations as opposed to words with abstract meanings. These physical symbols must have been directly connected to what was sensed in the world. Mute gestures and hieroglyphs are the basic forms of these primitive means of expression. Axiom LVII of the *New Science* claims that: "Mutes make themselves understood by gestures or objects that have natural relations with the ideas they wish to signify."[60] Vico calls this axiom "the principle of the hieroglyphs by which all nations spoke in the time of their first barbarism."[61] Gravina describes the first languages as words, paintings, sculptures in marble, or mute gestures that derived directly from the sensation of things. The representations changed the structure of what was represented but did not change the way in which the object's nature was communicated.[62] If one were looking for similarities between the two thinkers, this immediate association of mute gestures and hieroglyphs is intriguing, regardless of the fact that Vico draws a contrary conclusion to Gravina.

Because Vico does not accept a Cartesian criterion of certainty, he does not need to validate poetic truth by rooting it in certainty. Therefore, Vico's agenda does not rely on the idea that the first poets could sense the world better than we do. More importantly, Vico relies on a different definition of "poetic." For Gravina, *poesia* is the ability of the imagination to represent and embellish what one perceives. For Vico, *poesia* is an activity of making. *Sapienza poetica*, as discussed by Vico, was not used by the first poets to represent a world, but to create it.[63] He stresses that the first people used their powerful memories to invent new images and new gods from their scattered animalistic sensations.[64]

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60. Ibid., 225.

61. Ibid., 226.

62. Gravina, *Delle antiche favole*, 34–35.

63. For a discussion of making, memory, and poetic wisdom, see Verene, *Vico's Science of the Imagination*, 96–126, and Manuela Sanna, "Ingegno e Memoria in Giambattista Vico," *Italian Culture* 35, no. 2 (2017): 101–11.

64. Vico describes this in his discussion of the poetic logic where he highlights the way that the first humans attributed their own passions to objects and forces in the world. See, in particular, Vico, *The New Science*, 405–6.

The power of these invented myths to enchant the first people came from persuasive energy rather than real insight.

Vico thus rejects Gravina's attempt to show that myths were authentic representations of acute sense perception. He writes at the opening of the poetic logic: "that first language, spoken by the theological poets, was not a language in accord with the nature of the things it dealt with … but was a fantastic speech making use of physical substances endowed with life and most of them imagined to be divine."[65] While these first gestures did bear a natural relationship to the initial stimuli, Vico holds that they did not grasp the nature of the world, as Gravina claims. This is because the first poets portrayed all objects in the world as being alive, which they clearly are not. In describing the lifeworld of the first poets, Vico quotes the following phrase from Virgil: "[A]ll things are full of Jove."[66] The poetic character Jove is essential for his explanation of the origin of society, but it is an invention and not a metaphysical explanation.

For those unfamiliar with the philosophical approach taken by thinkers in the Neapolitan Enlightenment, Vico's *New Science* appears very odd because it does not read anything like the treatises of famous Northern Europeans. Indeed, the logic of it is so hard to penetrate that a reader might be tempted to think he is somehow defending the literal accuracy of ancient Roman religion or that he is trying to find a sort of mystical wisdom in these ancient sources. This, however, would be more in line with Gravina's project. While searching Vico's philosophy for mystical insight may bear some interesting fruits, it does not appear to capture his epistemological account of mythical thought.[67] Although he perhaps speaks mystically about the work of divine providence, he never connects the mentality of poetic wisdom directly to metaphysical understanding. His goal is to show, on the one hand, that poetic wisdom was a remarkable act of ingenuity because it tamed the first people and established human institutions. From this perspective, understanding poetic wisdom is essential for grasping the development of human history. Yet, on the other hand, he assures us from a rational

65. Ibid., 401.

66. Ibid., 379.

67. At one point in the *New Science*, he admits it is possible that Plato and Francis Bacon found "recondite wisdom" in ancient myths. The passage, however, largely mocks this possibility based on the harsh nature of the myths. Ibid., 80.

perspective that poetic wisdom is neither morally just nor scientifically true.

When Vico lays out his axioms, he does not do so in order of importance, but instead presents them organically, and they flow naturally through his work.[68] He does attribute an important place to wonder even if he does not discuss it at length. Axiom XXXV states, for example: "Wonder (*la maravigilia*) is the daughter of ignorance; and the greater the object of wonder, the more wonder grows."[69] As discussed at the opening of this essay, for one to feel wonder, one has to have a sense of one's own ignorance. When one understands something as a benefit or a threat, one can feel joy or fear, but not wonder. The first people would have been ignorant, and therefore susceptible to enchantment or terror. This ignorance also makes possible enchantment through false images rather than true representations.

Under the spell of wonder, one cannot form an immediate and instinctual physical response since one would not know how. There are really only two possible reactions. One could simply stop caring, but if the object of wonder were sufficiently strong enough then its spell could not be broken. Alternatively, one could be led to discover or invent an explanation for it. As Vico writes in Axiom XXXIX, "[c]uriosity—that inborn property of man, daughter of ignorance and mother of knowledge—when wonder wakens our minds, has the habit, wherever it sees some extraordinary phenomenon of nature, a comet for example, a sundog or a midday star, of asking straightaway what it means."[70] When we compare Axioms XXXV and XXXIX, we might want to speculate whether Vico means to say that curiosity and wonder are sisters since both are born of ignorance. That, however, does not matter. His point is that when humans experience wonder they must respond to it by inventing meaning. It is a call for poetic creation.

Vico then makes an important move that Gravina misses. The two Italian thinkers agree that the first expressions of meaning were mimetic representations of sense experience. For Gravina, these representations maintain a connection to the original stimulus. Vico suggests that in these first experiences of wonder, the first people had

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68. Ibid., 119. See also, James Robert Goetsch, Jr., *Vico's Axioms: The Geometry of the Human World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 88–100.

69. Vico, *The New Science*, 184.

70. Ibid., 189.

to have been extremely emotional. The giants in the state of nature had violent passions that would have carried over into the mimetic representation. Their acts of imitation took the forms of singing and dancing. Axiom LIX states that "[m]en vent great passions by breaking into song, as we observe in the most grief-stricken and the most joyful."[71] He concludes the axiom by saying: "it follows that the founders of the gentile nations, having wandered about in the wild state of dumb beasts and being therefore sluggish, were inexpressive save under the impulse of violent passions, and formed their first languages by singing."[72] The highly charged acts of dancing and singing would not have been any sort of detached imitation that would have captured the sense data of the experience. Instead, the attempt to create meaning through passionate shouting would have dramatically altered the original sensation.

Vico pushes this further. He writes that "[w]hen men are ignorant of the natural causes producing things, and cannot even explain them by analogy with similar things, they attribute their own nature to them. The vulgar, for example, say the magnet loves the iron."[73] According to Vico, the drive for an explanation would not have given the first poets direct access to sensation as Gravina suggested. The combination of wonder and ignorance would have clouded the already limited ability of the first people to control their thoughts and passions. The image they created was quite false. Vico ties these points together by saying: "The most sublime labor of poetry is to give sense and passion to insensate things; and it is characteristic of children to take inanimate things in their hands and talk to them in play as if they were living persons."[74] Hence, they would have seen the inanimate sky as an animate person. As a result of all these factors, the image of the aforementioned god Jove may be explained by the fact that the ancient poets, under the spell of wonder, attributed their own image to the sky and turned the thunder into a person who was shouting at them.

These points may be found in Vico's description of Jove as provided in his account of poetic wisdom. His second book of the *New Science*

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71. Ibid., 229.

72. Ibid., 230.

73. Ibid., 180. Vico cites this source of error throughout the *New Science*. He underscores, for example, that it forms the basis of the scholars' conceit (ibid., 122).

74. Ibid., 186.

is unquestionably baffling. Vico labours to explain how the gods and heroes of the Roman pantheon represent different ways in which the poets created rituals through mimesis, which then stabilized into ancient political institutions. Here, I will just focus on Vico's idea of the birth of community through the creation of Jove. Vico makes clear that his discussion of Jove is not limited to just Roman civilization, but that this model serves as a way of describing the universal course of human development. He claims that it is conceit to think that one civilization first developed all human institutions and taught it to all others.[75] Each civilization separately developed the idea of Jove. Each civilization had its own founding god with its own characteristics, but they all represent the same poetic wisdom.[76]

In the model Roman tradition, Jove was created by a giant thunder strike. This sounds exceptionally peculiar in relationship to other accounts of the origin of society that are based on the slow development of technology or rational choice. Nevertheless, it is consistent with what was suggested above. Thunder was the starting point because it generated terror from a source that the first people could not identify. An ordinary threat, such as an animal, would have produced an instinctual fear response that would have triggered a survival instinct. The first people would not have known how to respond to thunder. Vico explains that "a few giants, who must have been the most robust, and who were dispersed through the forests on the mountain heights where the strongest beasts have their dens, were frightened and astonished by the great effect whose cause they did not know."[77] This compelled them to look to the sky and imagine that there was a person shouting down at them. This was the creation of Jove. For them, the experience of thunder was transformed into the image of an angry man, like themselves, who was shouting at them and threatening them.

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75. Ibid., 125–126. For an interesting account of how this suggests that Vico held an anti-colonial account, see Timothy Brennan, *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel, and the Colonies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 21–36.

76. Vico, *The New Science*, 193. It is worth mentioning that Vico did separate the Judeo-Christian tradition from his account of universal history, claiming that this tradition always had divine wisdom (ibid., 54). It seems that Vico made this claim to appease the censors.

77. Ibid., 377.

Jove, of course, is not real. Unlike Gravina, who described ancient myth as *finto*, Vico calls the first god a *falsa divinità*.[78] This was only an issue because Gravina suggested otherwise, and because Vico's passion for defending the value of poetic wisdom is easily misread. The value of his position, however, comes not in somehow refuting the truth value of Jove, but in describing the initial system of human power that is based upon wonder and superstition. From his perspective, the first people were deceived. Vico thus notes: "it is concluded that divine providence … permitted them [the first people] to be deceived into fearing the false divinity [*falsa divinità*] of Jove because he could strike them with lightning."[79] This is what established the initial basis of morality—taming the giants in the state of nature and making them human. This deception, however, was not a product of rational choice. The power of wonder incited the first people to create the lie that was Jove and then made them believe it without realizing they had made it. Vico describes Jove as "king and father of men and gods, in the act of hurling the lightning bolt; an image so popular, disturbing, and instructive *that its creators themselves believed in it*, and feared, revered and worshiped it in frightful religions."[80] For Vico, the function of myths was simply to tame the bestial passions of the first people. He solves the problem of human sociability by saying that the experience of wonder turned their fear against them. This caused them to worship together in society. In Gravina's view, the ancient poets used the sense of wonder to teach. For him, perceptual knowledge of the truth and education led to human socialization. For Vico, the first poets used fear to both terrify themselves and, ultimately, to terrify others. Yet the wonder was so strong that these poets did not understand that they were the ones imposing this force upon themselves.

This becomes the model for power that runs through the first two ages of humanity: the age of gods and the age of heroes. Presumably as civilization enters the age of humans, it moves beyond this form of social control through bewitching false images. During the two ages, however, it was still necessary. At first, Jove produced a sense of shame in the first people. This feeling caused them to develop the institution

78. Ibid., 385.
79. Ibid., 385.
80. Ibid., 379, emphasis mine.

of marriage and to not copulate in the open.[81] This was the initial response to the power of Jove. Yet, it did not stop there. Every new law or custom in these early societies was referred back to the wonder and mystery of Jove. The experience was so powerful that every time there was a new mystery, the people turned back to the sky to find an answer.[82] The first laws and social orders developed, therefore, from what Vico calls reading the auspices. This happens when people feel pressure to explain a source of wonder, so much so that they imagine an explanation. He describes the first rulers this way: "Their poetic wisdom began with this poetic metaphysics, which contemplated God by the attribute of his providence; and they were called theological poets, or sages who understood the language of the gods expressed in the auspices of Jove; and were properly called divine in the sense of diviners, from *divinari*, to 'divine' or 'predict.'"[83] Wonder forced them to accept this superstition without understanding that they themselves were the source of the laws they were describing. Because this sense of wonder was so strong, they were able to enrapture the other founders of the asylums. Order was created through wonder even if it was not based on true understanding.

The moral divide between these two authors is seen most sharply in Vico's account of the discovery of the true Homer. Vico's brilliance was to recognize that Homer was not one person but an entire oral tradition. To demonstrate this point, he describes a series of anachronisms in Homer's writings that can only be explained if the poems had been rewritten or modified over time.[84] Yet, Vico makes this case primarily so that he can use Homer to prove his thesis that the first ages of humanity were exceptionally violent and cruel. Rather than accepting Gravina's idea that the Homeric poems embellished the truth to persuade the people to do moral good, Vico holds that they depict a morality by which rulers physically oppressed the people in order to keep their passions in line. Vico maintains that this cruelty was necessary at the time, so as to maintain order and stability. Those who could best assert that cruelty and narrate the finest stories about it were able to succeed in maintaining power. It would be ridiculous to think,

81. Ibid., 504.
82. Ibid., 183, 383.
83. Ibid., 381.
84. Ibid. 792–805.

however, that by reading Homer one could better understand how to live virtuously in the modern world. There is no reason to suspect that Homer understood contemporary morality better than the philosophers could.[85]

At this moment, where Vico and Gravina are farthest apart, I would like to conclude by bringing them back together. Throughout the course of this account, I have shown some ways in which the two authors share important ideas about the nature of poetic wisdom. While Vico's account of poetic wisdom and the imaginative universal is quite original, it was not created in a vacuum. To further grasp Vico's perspective it may be helpful to understand better his context in Naples in order to have a sounder sense of that to which he was responding. Vico's *New Science* may seem curious to those unfamiliar with his intellectual context. The more we study his contemporaries, however, the more we see that Vico was not working alone, but was instead part of a rich conversation about myth and politics.

Importantly, the two authors agree that by gaining a better understanding of poetic wisdom, it will be possible to find a solution to the problem of human sociability. Their answers, as has been discussed, are very different. Gravina thinks that poetic reason could clearly see the truth of the moral virtue of the heroes, and that mythmakers could use their acute perception to create a sense of wonder that would inspire the first people to virtue. Vico, on the other hand, holds that the original poets created images of false gods that inspired wonder in the first people, which led them to check their animalistic desires and follow their rulers in an ordered way. This divide, however, may not be as important as their agreement.

Vico and Gravina are both committed to the idea that the first poets had creative agency in the formation of their myths. The first rulers did not have the rational capacity to choose, and so they did not intentionally create religion as a way to deceive the first people. Nevertheless, the depictions of the gods and heroes were not instinctual. The first poets were geniuses who used their powerful imaginations to invent these portrayals in a way that enchanted their followers. For both authors, civilization was created by a powerful

85. Ibid, 667. On the importance of philosophy for morality in Vico, see ibid., 129–31.

act of ingenuity. This is in contrast to the perspectives presented in Northern Europe.

As discussed at the outset, the social contract tradition relies on rational consent to justify the creation of community. The alternative was the idea that civilization slowly evolved out of particular decisions in specific circumstances that came together to form stable institutions. These were the prevailing ideas about how beasts could have become civilized. By looking at Vico and Gravina, I hope I have shown that the Neapolitan Enlightenment presents a third alternative that is not often highlighted. For these Italian thinkers, a primitive aesthetic imagined the religion that shaped beasts into followers, and ultimately, citizens. By tracing this debate, I suggest that there is much to say about this alternative. By looking at this and other ideas from the Neapolitan Enlightenment, it might be possible to consider the ways that European political history may have gone, had it followed another path.