

# The Claim of the Word and the Religious Significance of Poetry A Humanistic Problem

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## *I. Introductory Observations*

While research on humanism must be built on a solid textual and historical basis, it can and must be designed in the light of questions which concern us today. For matters that press upon us today — language and human communication, the nature of community and society — are problems basic to the humanist tradition. Indeed, today's rejection of purely theoretical *a priori* thinking in favor of a concern for language and society has its parallel in the humanist reaction against the abstract thinking of medieval philosophy. Above all, through their work in philology, poetics, rhetoric and jurisprudence, the humanists identified a set of issues which set them apart from abstract thought and established a tradition that we today can recognize as our own. Among the problems so identified by humanism, we take four to be fundamental.

The first concerns the essence and function of poetry in its aim to reveal the specific realm of the human world. In my essay I shall speak *only* on this theme, because it seems to be of fundamental importance today.

The second concerns the word (philology), a problem arising from the interpretation of texts. In the process of interpreting the Greek and Latin texts, of which some were newly discovered, the humanists encountered the historicity of language, and in the light of these texts posed the question of the objectivity of thought. Since the question of the text is one of the word, and since the word is comprehended as the nature of man, the study of the word becomes *studia humanitatis*; philology is thus developed not as an isolated science, but as a study of *the nature of man*, a conception often overlooked by philology today.

The third question which defines the humanist tradition is that of human communication. The original manner of speaking to one another is not the rational. The goals of politics and the community, as well as the concrete realization of history, are achieved first and foremost through language as a means of persuasion. Such language is not rationally deducible from general principles, but originates through the grasp of actual situations. Thus a clear concept of rhetoric is crucial. It should not be understood as a

sophistic art, as it was from Descartes to German idealism (modern thought has rejected it altogether), but rather as a speech forming itself within concrete historical realities, in which the governing factor is the urgency which determines every political situation.

The fourth essential problem of the humanist tradition is that of the origin and structure of the human community. The question of "foresight", of *juris-prudentia*, leads the humanist to investigate how man is to construct his own world by transforming or "humanizing" nature outside him through work, and within him through the establishment of moral laws. From the humanist's point of view, jurisprudence is to be seen as the original philosophy. The study of law is not the study of juridical matters, but the "study of things which pertain to man". Law deals with the basic questions of order, leadership and formation.

In sum, for the humanist, as for modern investigators in the humanities and social sciences, the central concern is not a theory of knowledge or an abstract inquiry into the nature of truth, but an attempt to understand the basis of human society.

In view of what we have said above, we cannot speak of humanism in a general way, i.e., only as the period of *renovatio*, of the discovery of a new image of man, of human excellence and dignity, of classical antiquity in arts and letters. Since "humanism" has such a broad and ambiguous meaning today, it seems not only appropriate but necessary to define it more precisely in philosophical terms. By "humanism" I mean that philosophical movement which characterized thought in Italy, exclusively from the second half of the fourteenth century to the final third of the fifteenth century (1350-1475). Ficino's translation of Plato at the end of the fifteenth century, and the speculative metaphysical Platonism and Neoplatonism which it triggered, led to a break with the *humanist* approach to philosophy. It was taken up later only by isolated thinkers such as Nizolius, or outside Italy by Vives and later by Gracian in his theory of *ingenium*. Finally, the humanist controversy reached its height in the thought of G. B. Vico, whose work provides an outline for the entire range of humanism's implications.

Our interest in the Italian humanist tradition, which has been forgotten or misunderstood, does not and must not lie so much in its historical or literary significance, as in its present, theoretical, philosophical topicality. This means that we must approach humanism from the standpoint of its significance and importance today. Otherwise, humanist research cannot be of fundamental philosophical interest.

Our *first* thesis is that the problems of Humanism have their relevance in connection with the problem of awareness, *where and when modern thought begins*. We are accustomed to affirm that modern

thought begins with Descartes. Here the problem is that of truth. Where we are able to demonstrate that the problems of humanism are quite different, we are obliged to reconsider the problem of the beginning of modern thought. Only because scholarly research looked most of all for metaphysical or theoretical problems (the relationship between the world and thought) could scholars such as Croce and Gentile, Cassirer, W. R. Curtius and Kristeller — from different points of view — deny that humanism had a real philosophical significance and affirm that principally Ficino's Platonic thought or Renaissance Aristotelianism were representative of the philosophy of the time.

So our aim is to find and delineate the problems which are typical of humanism. We will see that in opposition to the traditional metaphysics and the philosophy of the new world as put forth by Descartes, the main problem is not that of truth. So the question arises: are these forgotten problems relevant which we must develop?

The *second thesis* is that the main problems of humanism have little to do with the problems of the philosophy of the Renaissance. The main accent of the philosophical problems of humanism which we are here developing is not truth, but the word in its relation to the question of the origin of the historicity of man. In this connection, the poetic, imaginative word, as we shall see, acquires a leading function in place of the rational word. As a result of this attitude, the function of fantasy as opposed to reason (*ratio*) attained a primacy. The humanist no longer questioned the logical relationship between subject and object, but rather the historical appearance of language in general and of the poetic language of the thing in particular in which a different world is revealed in each case. Thus the central problem is not the relationship between the beings — subject and object — but the "openness" in which man and his world appears.

A *third* introductory observation: the Italian humanist tradition is thoroughly pervaded by a fundamental criticism — in contrast to the metaphysics of the Renaissance — of every kind of abstract philosophy and of the anonymity of and disregard for time and space. Together with this rejection, it constantly emphasizes the emotive character of scientific and philosophical trains of thought. No wonder, then, that latter-day rationalism, idealism and formalism depreciated and misinterpreted Italian humanism.

A *last* introductory observation: the general attitude of the philosophy opposing humanism is today *negative*, and we must understand why. The main reason is that modern philosophy is formalistic and for this reason often refuses every kind of speculation on man and metaphysics. Metaphysical thought claims to begin

with original principles in order to define reality. Because these immediate principles cannot be proven, they therefore — so it is claimed — cannot have any scientific character, for either they arise from intuition, or they come from so-called immediate evidence. In neither case do they admit of scientific examination. This thesis has its most mature statement in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Science can proceed only when its general validity can be proven, hence only in the sphere of the laws and relations that hold between the terms of a system. In other words, assertions and contradictions can occur only within concrete systems. The system cannot found its own presuppositions, for they are the basis of the system. Outside the symbolic and formal world of the system, therefore, lies nothing but silence and mystery.

By means of final formulas and the adoption of rules, symbolic logic seeks to construct a system that has a purely formal character and so must dispense with all metaphysics and any kind of humanism. Formal philosophy leads to the assertion of the primacy of rational language and the rejection of poetic, metaphorical speech, and of rhetoric in the field of scientific philosophy. With such a thesis, we are far from all problems of humanism.

## 2. Dante's "De Monarchia" and the Problems of "De Vulgari eloquentia" and "Convivio"

To develop our philosophical problematic on the main philosophical significance of the poetic word and its original function in the opening of the human world — a specific humanistic problem — we begin with two authors who come at the end of the period of medieval thought, and who outlined the problematic of humanism: Dante (1265-1321) and Albertino Mussato (1261-1329).

The importance of Dante is that we have in one work of his, the *De monarchia*, an exemplary case of traditional medieval metaphysical thought, and in the two works, the *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Convivio*, the beginning of an absolutely new way of thinking.

We remember — as an introduction to the conception of science which we will find in the *De monarchia* — that ever since Aristotle, to whom medieval thought returned again and again, everything is either the principle or what follows from it through the deductive method (*arche*, the principle as what is first and what governs). According to such an interpretation, true reality is deduced by a rational process from what is "original," from "Being" conceived as the highest thing, that is, as that which must truly be.

For this reason, the only scientific kind of language is logical language: rhetorical, poetic language is excluded from the framework of science, including philosophy as metaphysics. Rational

thought claims to have a "hold" on the essence (*ousia*) of phenomena by means of the concept (*horos*) and the definition by which it can "grasp" it. In this way, phenomena are "fixed" *once and for all in a necessary abstraction from time and place*. All empirical variations that are not general are then non-essential. Mere "human language," i.e., our ordinary language which makes use of images, metaphors and analogy, cannot claim to be scientific. This is why poetry belongs to literature and rhetoric as an art of persuasion. The study of being as such — which developed from philosophy as the science of metaphysics — was bound to take its starting point from a consideration of universals, so it was bound to be carried out *a priori*, with questions of historical relevance being moved to a subordinate level.

The abstract nature of philosophy and metaphysics comes out in two decisive formulations, for example in Eriugena: "The rational soul is able to pursue knowledge *in itself*, away from the sound of the articulate voice and the broken speech."<sup>1</sup> It follows that it is the function of philosophy as a metaphysical science to investigate being, but it is not its function to investigate the structure of different grammars and rhetoric — in other words, of language, in which man's historical nature is expressed — because these fields "do not deal with the nature of things; they deal either with the rules of human words that are not formed in accordance with reality but in accordance with the habits of speakers, or with particular situations and persons that are removed from actual reality"<sup>2</sup> Owing to its connections with logic, a science thus understood becomes autonomous to the point of turning into pure abstract discussion; the scholar becomes — as the humanist will later reproach him for being — a mere "friend of words, not of things."<sup>3</sup> Under such conditions, philosophy dissolves into arguments about the abstract, logical meanings of words, and in fact remains a mere "controversy about words."<sup>4</sup>

The schema of scientific thought for Dante in the *De monarchia* has as its theme the determination of political human life under the sign of the problem of truth. The method of realizing true knowledge is established in the following sentence: "since any truth which is not itself a principle is demonstrated as following from the truth of some principle, it is necessary in any inquiry to make clear from what principle the certainty of the subordinate

1. Eriugena, *De divisione naturae*, Migne, P. L. vol. 122, 1852; Lib. V.4. p. 860.

2. Eriugena, *ibid.*, p. 869.

3. Valla, *Opera omnia*, ed. E. Garin, Torino, 1962, vol. I. p. 629.

4. Valla, *ibid.*, p. 544.

propositions may be analytically derived."<sup>5</sup> The method is deductive, i.e., rational, and thus a theory of politics must be developed as a function of the following consideration: "Just as nature makes the thumb for one purpose, the whole hand for another, the arm for still another, and the whole man for a purpose different from all these, so an individual man has one purpose, a family another, a neighborhood another, a city another, a state another, and finally there is another for all of mankind."<sup>6</sup>

What is here the essence of man for Dante and traditional philosophy? *Intellectual rational activity*. This activity can develop itself only when it is not disturbed, and the aim of the realization of political activity is peace: "man's basic capacity is to have a potentiality or power for being intellectual."<sup>7</sup> "I have now made clear enough that the proper work of mankind taken as a whole is to exercise continually its entire capacity for intellectual growth, first, in theoretical matters, and secondarily, as an extension of theory, in practice."<sup>8</sup> And in conclusion: ". . . it is evident that mankind, too, is most free and easy to carry on its work when it enjoys the quiet and tranquillity of peace. Man's work is almost divine, and it is clear that of all the things that have been ordained for our happiness, the greatest is universal peace."<sup>9</sup>

The political life has as its main aim keeping the peace. The solution for Dante is the universal monarch, because in his universality he cannot have particular desires or personal ends. He must emphasize that his task is to take care that order, established once for all, will not be changed; he must struggle against historical developments. "Now where there is nothing left to desire, greed is impossible, for passions cannot exist when their objects are destroyed. But a universal ruler has nothing that he still desires . . . Hence it follows that the world-ruler is the purest among mortal wills in which justice may reside."<sup>10</sup>

We must realize the consequences of such theoretical theses: 1) The preeminence of the problem of truth; 2) the preeminence of rational thought and speech; 3) the unhistorical character of truth and of the human world. Change is disorder: the historical task of the universal monarch can only be understood as a fight against change, against historicity.

5. Dante, *De monarchia*, I.2.131; *On World Government*, tr. H. W. Schneider (Indianapolis, 1957), 4.

6. *Ibid.*, I.3.1; I.3.22; *On World Government*, 5.

7. *Ibid.*, I.3.39; I.3.47; *On World Government*, 6.

8. *Ibid.*, I.4.1; *On World Government*, 7.

9. *Ibid.*, I.4.29; *On World Government*, 7.

10. *Ibid.*, I.11.57; *On World Government*, 14.

In the *Convivio* and in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, a new, humanistic, conception of the essence of the human world breaks through and displaces the method of scientific thought. The primacy of the poetic word and its political aim (and hence historical function) emerges, together with a denial of the primacy of the rational, abstract, unhistorical word. We must be aware that up to Dante the scientific language was Latin, which in its universality guaranteed its independence from all time and so from every particular influence: the truth is and must be universal. But in the *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Convivio* Dante affirms the thesis that Latin is only a "grammatical" language, and therefore unhistorical, abstract, dead. Now instead of Latin, he affirms the primacy of the vernacular language. This thesis is in opposition to the general conception which we find in *De Monarchia*. The vernacular language is different for every people, and Dante underlines the primacy of poetic language in the vernacular, i.e., in an historical and not an abstract, dead language like Latin.

He claims that "true" or "authentic" language can never be "artificial" or "fixed" (he is referring to Latin), but only one in which man works, acts and lives, in which he expresses the striving and passions that stem from a concrete situation. "The people's tongue is all the closer to us the more we are associated with it. For it is this alone, then, that is close to us, and not in any accidental way, but because it is associated with the people that are closer to us, our relatives, fellow-citizens, and our own people. This is our native tongue, which is not only close to us personally, but near to everyone of us."<sup>11</sup> In another passage in the *Convivio* he writes: "It is manifestly through the window of a house that fire escapes, and if someone asked whether the fire entered there and another responded to him that it did, I would not know at which of the two I should scoff more. And it would not be otherwise with the question and the response if someone asked me whether the love about which I speak is in me, and I responded yes."<sup>12</sup>

Dante's theory is that language is a contextual response to human needs. He exemplifies this thesis by referring to the Old Testament: "the manifold languages associated with the erection of the Tower of Babel, and what is essential to this work". For Dante, the concept of work conveys a meaning to natural things and thereby transforms them with regard to some particular yet unattained goal. In the concrete case with which he concerns himself here, the erection of the tower is meant. In other words, every job that arises from the necessity of fulfilling a particular task defines reality and becomes

11. Dante, *Convivio*, I.12.28.

12. *Ibid.*, I.12.1.

the source of naming. The origin of work, from which the various languages develop, is effort. This is articulated according to the as yet unattained aim of "humanizing nature." Herein lies the origin of human historicity.

Dante writes that with the construction of the Tower of Babel, some of the people "commanded, some were master builders, some put up walls, some dressed them with edging . . . so that . . . they became divided into many languages in the course of this work, and when the people left this project, they never returned to the same mutual understanding. Only those who were united by the same activity were left with the same language."<sup>13</sup> From this basic situation of man, Dante affirms his thesis of the preeminence of poetic language, because he will, as a poet, *endow the historical reality* of his people.

This task had never before been formulated in such a programmatic and conscious way by a poet, i.e., as a hunt for a panther that is hidden in a thicket in the forest, in the depths of the woods of the various dialects. The poet as orator has in view the realization of a new historical world. Thus the fundamental and programmatic character of his affirmation: "And I give to this friend this kind of greatness insofar as I make him have actually and openly whatever goodness he has potentially and hiddenly. I am doing this as part of my own special mission, which is to manifest the conceived idea."<sup>14</sup>

What did Dante mean by this expression "conceived idea"? Shall we interpret it as a rationally comprehended and formulated statement? In this case the poetic word would only be a deliberate rhetorical formulation to make the rational truth more easily comprehensible and in this way give to the sentence a greater effect. We may answer this question only with the contrary positions of the significance of language in the logical and poetic realms. According to the quotation from the *De monarchia* to which we have referred, rational language is preeminent. Its task consists in the formulation of truth independently of any spatial or temporal reference and consequently of individual or particular relations: in this sense the language has to be utterly impersonal and valid for every country and time. Its rational character excludes every image and metaphor.

Radically different is the task which Dante sets himself as poet in *De vulgari eloquentia* and in *Convivio*. He looks for a historical language through which he can be bound to his country, to his relationships, to his work and needs. The poetic word alone will open a political

13. Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* I.VII. 6-7.

14. Dante, *Convivio* I.10.41.



realm in which the poetical language will obtain its historical priority. For this reason Dante attributes to poetical language the following four qualities: "illustrious" (*illustre*), "principal" (*cardinale*), "courtly" (*aulicum*), and "legal" (*curiale*).<sup>15</sup> Dante looks for the truth which has its significance in the realm of a concrete historical situation, never in an abstract, unhistorical world, as it appears in the formulation of *De monarchia*. It is in the unhidden historicity that the problem and its solution arise and show their urgency.

The consequences of this theory of language are: (1) The principal problem here is that of the source of the historicity of man's world. (2) The problem of the historicity of man is not resolved by the problem of truth, but by the needs which man must face in every new situation. (3) This corresponding activity obliges man to give reality a significance with respect to his needs, i.e., to "transfer" (*metapherein*). This underlies the fundamental activity, which no longer has a literary, but a much deeper existential function. From this point of view, Dante's theory of language and his conception of the importance of metaphorical, poetic speech, are no longer solely literary problems. (4) The primacy of the abstract, universal, logical word is broken, and for the problem of truth is substituted that of "revealing", of the "clearing", of the "opening", of the "unhiddenness" (*Unverborgenheit*), i.e., of the original framework in which beings reveal themselves: *the importance of historicity*. We have heard the principal thesis that the original historical "unhiddenness" reveals, not through logical thinking and speech, but through *the poet*, through the poetical word, through metaphorical thinking; here arises the realm in which the problems of this world arise, and can be logically resolved. (5) Fifthly, we must admit that if our interpretation of the *Convivio* and the *De vulgari eloquentia* is valid, and if we can demonstrate that the problems we have sketched have a continuity and a deepening in the humanist tradition, then we are obliged to admit that the identification of the beginning of modern thought with Descartes and the evaluation of humanism as only a literary movement must be revised. The primacy of poetic speech in humanism shows itself to be intimately connected with the problem of the beginning of modern thought, i.e., philosophy. (6) Dante's theory of the historicity of man deriving from his theory of language is fundamentally anti-formalist, and so an answer to actual, formal philosophy.

The fundamental metaphoric activity of the transfer of significance to things arises from needs. Language arising as a metaphorical activity is profoundly an answer to the needs of man, and it has its significance only in view of these needs. In this precise

15. Dante, *De vulgari eloq.* I.17-18.

sense, Dante affirms that language arises "either as a question or as an answer," i.e., in the context of some material or spiritual imposition of needs.<sup>16</sup> This imposition manifests itself as a task, and it is only in reference to this task that reality, as it is open to our sense organs, receives this meaning.

Two aspects of this are important here: on the one hand, the attribution of meanings to sensory appearances as the presupposition for the activity of the "transference" of the *metapherein*, and on the other hand, the imposition of a tension and attention understood as "attending to". According to Dante, the original, i.e., the divine, manifests itself in this original tension.<sup>17</sup> In connection with the problems that we have hinted at, the philosophical importance of Dante's theory of language will become apparent.

3. *A. Mussato (1261-1329): The Sacral Claim of Poetry and its Preeminence*

Can we find in humanism a real continuation of this theory of the function of poetry which denies the primacy of the rational word and the preeminence of the problem of truth, which was the principal problem of traditional metaphysics?

The rejection of philosophy as logic and abstract metaphysics is constantly voiced by the humanists. Petrarch writes: "I do not like the garrulous and longwinded scholastic philosophy, but I love true philosophy that dwells not in words, but in this."<sup>18</sup> Petrarch underlines his awareness of the fact that man's development cannot be attained through explanations and communications of metaphysical knowledge. If, for instance, his treatise bears the title, *On his own Ignorance and that of many Others*, this should not be understood as humility. Petrarch says in this treatise that he does not belong among the knowledgeable in the sense of the particular logic and dialectic which prevailed in scholastic philosophy during his time. Actually, he says, the knowledge of logicians is ignorance, while his own ignorance, i.e., his rejection of logic, constitutes his wisdom.

"I have read all Aristotle's moral books if I am not mistaken. Some of them I have also heard commented on. I seemed to understand something of them before this huge ignorance was detected. Sometimes I have perhaps become more learned through them when I went home, but not better, not so good as I ought to be; and I often complained to myself, occasionally to others too, that by no facts was the promise fulfilled which

16. *Ibid.*, I.4.4.

17. *Ibid.*, I.4.4.

18. Petrarch, *De remediis utriusque fortunae* I.

*Dialogus XLVI* in *Opera omnia*, Basel, 1554. vol. I, p. 57.

the philosopher makes at the beginning of the first book of his *Ethics*, namely, that "we learn this part of philosophy not with the purpose of gaining knowledge but of becoming better."<sup>19</sup>

Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), a pupil of Petrarch and first Chancellor of the city of Florence, says in his treatise, *On the Labors of Hercules*, not unlike his teacher, that he is saddened and at the same time irritated by those who are ready to dispute indiscriminately about all and sundry matters. Their method is purely logical. "To the intricate cases that they turn backwards and forwards, delaying their answer, they affix many a premise, append postulates, and posit what is to follow as the conclusion."<sup>20</sup> Salutati is also well-acquainted with the procedure of those rationalist philosophers who devote themselves primarily to the study of the logicians and formalists, "Britannic philosophers". "As for the Aristotelian texts, they do not understand them, but they read some treatise or other by all kinds of "Britannics" worlds away from us, as though our regions did not offer enough for education."<sup>21</sup>

Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444) mentions by name those philosophers who limit themselves to logic: "Against it [the true, not abstract dialectics] those barbarians advance at the charge, who have their seat at the other end of the ocean (in England). What kind of people are they! Even their names are dreadful: Ferabrich, Buser, Occam."<sup>22</sup>

But our problem after Dante's interpretation was: do we really have here a new kind of thinking, a new conception of historicity and of the function of poetry? Are we obliged to admit that there arises here a kind of philosophizing which is absolutely different from that to which we are accustomed?

For our purposes, we want to return to A. Mussato, an early humanist and contemporary of Dante's. He belongs to that circle of Latin poets known as "the Paduan circle" (*cenacolo padovano*). Like many of the humanists, Mussato was a statesman and historian as well as a Latin poet. In 1315, in Padua, he was rewarded for his tragedy, *Eccerinis*, by being crowned a poet. Until today, Mussato has been judged chiefly from the standpoint of the history of literature. One looks in vain for his name in the different histories

19. Petrarch, *On his own Ignorance and that of many others*, in E. Cassirer, P. V. Kristeller and J. H. Randall, eds., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago, 1948), 103.

20. C. Salutati, *De laboribus Herculis*, ed. Ullmann, Turicii, 1951. I.1.2-4, pp.3-4.

21. C. Salutati, *loc. cit.*

22. L. Bruni, *Ad P. P. Histrum dialogus in Prosatori latini del Quattrocento*, ed. E. Garin. Milan, 1925, p. 59.

of philosophy. In a discussion of Mussato's thought, it is important first to know that his poetry provoked the otherwise unknown preacher, Brother Johanninus of Mantua, to contradict him publicly.

Mussato's letters on the essence of poetry are among the most important early humanist writings about the philosophical function of poetry. In the following I refer to epistles IV, VII and XVIII where the problems that concern us are treated in the most fundamental fashion.<sup>23</sup> In these letters the aim is not just to defend poetry but to illuminate its ability to guide us. Mussato's main thesis is directed at the sacral claim of poetry. He regards poetry as a divine art (*divina ars*) a second philosophy (*altera philosophia*), and theology of the world (*theologia mundi*). Its imagistic, metaphorical way of speaking is opposed to and has primacy over rational thought and logical truth. Early Italian humanism attempts, within the framework of this problem, almost in desperation, to free itself from traditional metaphysics.

Let us therefore try to examine Mussato's basic thesis that poetry is a divine art, theology of the world, in a way that goes beyond the traditional inspiration.<sup>24</sup> In one of his letters is found that passionately noble reproach that those who would not recognize the prevailing sacral role of poetry would ignore its great "ministry".<sup>25</sup> By means of claims made upon us by the original Being's manifestation in the world — Being that Mussato identifies with God — beings are revealed in the rhythmic, ordered, and, at the same time, ordering power of language. Mussato asserts the thesis, which for his time was monstrous, that the poet has a sacral function that consists in revealing beings.

Johanninus of Mantua conjoined his attack on Mussato's Priapus poems with the argument that these very poems are proof that poetry as such cannot be theology or "divine art". Mussato's reply to this is that the fact of his having written Priapean poems could in no way be an objection to the divine character of poetry. Poetry's character as a "theology of the world" does not derive from its having sacral objects in each case, but from its power to reveal beings — which it also is itself — and among beings is also included the obscene. In other words, poetry remains a "divine art" even when it illuminates a profane object. He says: "Sometimes I tell tales of the holy Minerva, and Venus too is an apt subject for my efforts".<sup>26</sup>

23. A. Mussato, *Tragoediae, Eclogae et Fragmenta, Epistulae*. (Batavorum, n.d.). This edition is based upon the one published in Venice in 1636.

24. *Ibid.*, Epistula XVIII. 61A.

25. *Ibid.*, Epistula IV.41A.

26. *Ibid.*, Epistula VII.44B.

Mussato does not distinguish, as Boccaccio does later, between good and frivolous or obscene poetry in order thereby to rescue poetry from moralizing critics. For if one were to identify its sacral character with a single manifestation of beings, then its divinity would be equated with that of its particular object. This would result in a mystification of God. Poetry's concern is not "truth", but rather a temporal revelation of beings including even the particular gods, gods that cannot be equated with God in whose poetic force they emerge to claim our attention. In the ancient religions, it was Jupiter who slew the Titans with lightning bolts; in the Old Testament, God strikes at man with the bewilderment of language: "God confused the languages here, which corresponds in our tradition to Jupiter's hurling thunderbolts".<sup>27</sup> In Greek religion, it is poetically recounted that the gods swore by the river Styx, and Mussato draws an analogy here to the words of Christ that water of baptism is the means of life.<sup>28</sup> In a similar way, he says that the ancient poets imagined that God was "the true and the good in something corporeal, as if he were really in it".<sup>29</sup>

This context alone is sufficient to render comprehensible Mussato's claim that "the poets gave the first men the secrets of reality" and that "because the language of the poets went beyond the beings present at hand, they were called 'seers' or 'vates'".<sup>30</sup> Here we already find the thesis that Vico will later take up and develop in his *New Science*.

The poet's Muse speaks in images that direct or point, it speaks in suggestive puzzles or "enigmas".<sup>31</sup> Mussato terms the words of the poets also *figmenta*. *Figmentum* stems from *ingere*, to form or shape. The shaping in question here directs us to something further, more original, to which it refers. This is *semainei*, language that directs us through something to something else: metaphor. The mind is expanded and stretched by these *figmenta* by being forced to direct its attention to something that goes beyond the words that are immediately used.<sup>32</sup> But that which exceeds the beings expressed, that which is in control and beyond these things, is the *sacrum*, the holy.

The poet is also the one who has the key to the essence of the past, the deeds of heroes, kings, times of war and peace. Being is not to be sought in the yellowing of things of the past. What arises subsists a while and then decays. Thus Mussato comes to

27. *Ibid.*, Epistula IV.41A.

28. *Ibid.*, Epistula XVIII.60E.

29. *Ibid.*, Epistula XVIII.60F.

30. *Ibid.*, Epistula VII.44C.

31. *Ibid.*, Epistula IV.41A.

32. *Ibid.*, Epistula VII.44D.

his daring statement that the poets are there before the ones engaged in struggles of whom they sing. Only through the poet's work "are" they the heroes with their deeds, with their fame. "Through me, Pergama, the fortress of the Dardanian Teukrion was won back; before the Dardanians were in Troy, I was there. The civil wars on the Aemathian (Macedonian) fields and the distinctions of the Caesars were reported to the people by me."<sup>33</sup>

This conception of the originality of poetry also explains Mussato's interpretations of the laurel crown as an award of honor for the poet. The beings that emerge through the poem are things that arise, bloom, and decay; that which remains eternally green is the eternal function of poetry. For this reason, it is poetry, the word of Being. The ancient gods died, just as do the present-day ones, but what does not die is the power of the poetic language in which they appear. In Mussato's words: "And as the laurel is evergreen and is not picked with dry leaves, so too does it [poetry] possess that eternal beauty. So it comes about that the works of the seers are crowned with laurel."<sup>34</sup>

In order to understand the importance of this thesis, we must also consider the contrary interpretation of the laurel crown expressed in the words of Johanninus of Mantua. He points out that the "laurel crown is circular and at every point recedes from the middle, which signifies that poetry usually rotates around the truth but always remains distant from the center of this truth."<sup>35</sup> For Johanninus, the preacher, truth is that which is logically, rationally "fixed". When he proclaims the primacy of truth, his sole concern is the question of relationships among beings; he does not consider the eternally green source that opens a clearing for things. According to such an interpretation, the circular form of the laurel crown must naturally be regarded as something that is always "distant" from the middle, that is, from the center of gravity that Johanninus identifies with the truth. For Johanninus, the evergreen of the laurel is identical with the blooming of truth. Hence, he judges the poetic to be something "external" and "frail". He says: "The crown, however, was made of laurel, which externally is green and possesses a fragrance, but internally it contains a bitterness that is evident in the fruit, which is very bitter. In this way, poetry possesses a certain beauty of words that is external, but inside it contains the bitterness of vanity."<sup>36</sup>

33. *Ibid.*, Epistula VII.45C.

34. *Ibid.*, Epistula IV.41C.

35. *Ibid.*, Epistula fratris Johannini a Mantua, 57C.

36. *Ibid.*, Epistula fratris Johannini a Mantua, 57C.

Because for Mussato, poetry is in essence theology, the poet has God in his heart and his speech.<sup>37</sup> That which endures is not the truth of some beings which are proven to exist. To focus on these would mean falling into a forgetfulness of God. For Mussato, poetry's role is so essential that it is itself an "other philosophy".<sup>38</sup> It "shows", it "reveals". Thanks to its originality, it speaks through images in which whatever is currently of concern comes into historical existence.<sup>39</sup> Poetry is understood as a sacred activity, as a holy union in the sense of a constant reference to what is original.

With this thesis, we have strayed far from every form of deductive metaphysics which, according to Heidegger, has determined the fate of Western thought. In the course of the controversy described here, Italian humanism attempted to break away from traditional metaphysics. This is that humanism which Heidegger rejected because he was of the opinion that it led to an anthropological perspective, for which the problem of Being is something completely foreign.

## II. *The Theory of Ingenium as the Essence of the Poetic, Metaphorical Word*

### 1. *G. Boccaccio (1313-1375): Does Theology precede Poetry?*

We affirmed in the first part of this essay that the humanist tradition should not be discussed as a purely scholarly, historical, or literary one. The essence of our preceding reflections, with respect to Dante and Mussato, is that the poetic word opens up the place and the time in which things, people, and their institutions appear and obtain their meaning. This takes place in an effortless way, since it does not stem from a difficult rational inference. Can we find in humanism a real continuity of this original function of poetry which denies the primacy of the rational word? And if so, what are the reasons which lead the humanist to such a conception?

We can begin to answer the first question with reference to G. Boccaccio (1313-1375) and his work *Genealogia deorum*. Dante claimed that the poetic word permits reality to appear in terms of historicity. There is an obvious objection which can be raised against this position, an objection with which the humanists repeatedly occupied themselves. Does not poetic language, with its metaphorical character, put a "veil" on the thing that it claims to uncover? The humanists speak of poetry's *velamen* behind which the actual *res* remains hidden. How then do the "veil" and *res* relate to each other? Must we not designate poetry as the area of rational contradiction, since we attribute to it the opposing functions of "veiling" and

37. *Ibid.*, Epistula XVIII.56B.

38. *Ibid.*, Epistula VII.44C.

39. *Ibid.*, Epistula VII.44E.

"unveiling"? This problem is the main subject of Boccaccio's *Genealogia deorum*.

The question arises in a surprising context in Boccaccio, far from every logical or metaphysical discussion. As a humanist, Boccaccio was interested in rescuing Roman mythology. The meaning of this mythology was endangered because it stood in obvious contradiction to Christian belief. How is it possible, despite this contradiction, to grant a meaning to this mythology and to preserve it against a dogmatic relegation to the past? In other words, how is it possible to interpret the Latin gods without simply dismissing them as a meaningless, confused error of the human mind?

Precisely this question is the starting point of the *Genealogia deorum*. The King of Naples asks Boccaccio, through a military man named Donnino Parmigiano, how it is possible at all that the Roman emperor, for example, could permit himself to be honored as a god. In order to answer this question, Boccaccio returns to a theory of poetry based upon medieval presuppositions. Boccaccio's thesis is that poetry reveals the reality that lies behind a "veil" (*velamen*) which, when brought to light, permits the "thing", the *res*, to appear in unhiddenness. His first definition reads: "The fable is an exemplary and demonstrable speech which unfolds beneath a veil. If its covering is removed, then the intention of the fable becomes obvious. And if something appetizing appears under the fabulous veil, then the fable does not prove to be useless."<sup>40</sup> We should take notice of the following in regard to this definition. The fable is an "exemplary or demonstrable speech". The example, as we know, has a function in rhetoric similar to that of induction in logic. *Inducere* does not mean originally to derive a unity from a multiplicity by means of abstraction, but rather to trace a multiplicity back to a meaning, giving unity in order to define it anew from there. Accordingly, the demonstration that is the concern of Boccaccio's definition is not rational proof as in logic, but a making visible of something, an immediate "showing". The fable brings about a "clearing" in a twofold sense. It opens up the place and the time in which things, people, and their institutions appear and it does this in an effortless way, since it does not stem from a difficult, rational inference. Fables play a decisive role this way when they arise in the world. They have an "archaic" meaning because they lead us. Directly after giving his definition of poetry, Boccaccio writes that the poetic fable "proceeds from the interior of the god". The capacity to construct fables is therefore a gift which only a few share. This explains the fact that the poets were always rare. "The

40. Giovanni Boccaccio, *De Genealogia deorum* (Bari; 1951). 16, p.706; *On Poetry*, tr. C. G. Osgood (Indianapolis, 1930)



results of this inspiration are sublime, such as the compulsion of the soul to speak."<sup>41</sup> The unconditioned nature of language breaks forth in poetry; the poet cannot call upon it when and as he pleases. Poetry gives voice to an original force, a power which is expressed in the word. It possesses an "inventive" character which enables it to render something obvious and open to view.

As we have said, Boccaccio developed his theory of poetry in order to rescue the study of the Latin gods, since in ancient poetical works gods appear in different forms and always in the most crucial places. But now Boccaccio finds himself in the dramatic situation that he cannot grant that his own theory (that poetry is theology) has validity for the Old and New Testament beliefs; theology comes before poetry. He himself is a Christian; hence he must leave behind the theory of poetry as the opening up of human history in order to identify poetry with Christian theology, that is, with a *res* that is outside history.

Poetic, metaphoric, fabulous language is part of the Jewish and Christian traditions. We see this in the Old Testament, for example, when Moses speaks of God as a burning flame.<sup>42</sup> As an example of poetic language in the New Testament, Boccaccio names the different animal metaphors representing Christ. "The Holy Writ is nothing other than a poetic fiction when we say that Christ is a lion, then a lamb, or a worm, then a dragon . . . How do words of the Savior sound in the gospel, if not like a speech with a strange meaning, a manner of speaking, to which we usually give the name allegory?"<sup>43</sup> In the next sentence, he comes to the conclusion that "evidently poetry is not just theology, but rather theology is also poetry."<sup>44</sup> Boccaccio repeatedly stresses the thesis that poetry has a sacred character. One can argue about the country in which poetry first arose, but not about its always having a sacred character.<sup>45</sup> The poets are called "pious men". It follows that the poetic faculty belongs to those who are pious and that they "derive their own origin from the sphere of the divine and receive their name from its efficacy."<sup>46</sup>

41. *Ibid.*, 16.8, p.699; *On Poetry*

42. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Vita di Dante* (Florence, 1833), p.56; *The Earliest Lives of Dante*, tr. J. R. Smit (New York, 1963).

43. *Ibid.*, p.59; *Earliest Lives*,

44. *Ibid.*, p.59; *Earliest Lives*,

45. Boccaccio, *De Genealogia deorum*, 16.8. p.701; *On Poetry*,

46. *Ibid.*, 16.8. p.701; *On Poetry*,

2. *C. Salutati (1331-1406): Philosophical Defense of the Primacy of Poetry.*

Mussato's theory that the particular historical world, with its gods, institutions, temples, and sacred acts arises through the poetic word is further developed by another humanist thinker, Coluccio Salutati, who sought to carry it to its logical conclusion.

Salutati was born in 1331 in Stignano and died in 1406 as Chancellor of Florence. He belongs to the generation which follows Petrarch and, next to Boccaccio, was his most important student. In 1374, he became the Chancellor of the Signoria in Florence, a position that he held continuously for 31 years until his death. He was the outstanding figure in the *Paradiso degli Alberti*, the first humanist circle of scholars at the monastery of Santo Spirito in Florence. He arranged to have M. Chrysoloras called to Florence as the first Greek teacher in Italy. In *The Labors of Hercules* he presents the thesis that God is never identical with beings. Hence, interpreting beings as a metaphor of God requires that we regard each being as a *velamen*, a "veil", under which God is "concealed" and, at the same time, becomes "unconcealed". At first glance, it may seem surprising that Salutati concerns himself with a defense of poetry in a work entitled *The Labors of Hercules*. In the ancient tradition, Hercules was a mythical symbol of man's being in the world, insofar as he was regarded as the conqueror of the foreign powers of nature and the inventor of technical works.<sup>47</sup> Salutati's project is directed most of all against "those who in our time glorify themselves as philosophers."<sup>48</sup> For these are the ones who regard poetry such that they "belittle it in part and in part condemn it."<sup>49</sup> Salutati's thesis is that only through poetry does human historicity emerge into "unhiddenness". Poetry thereby assumes a function of pathos as the foundation of the human order. The selection of words, their sound and their rhythm, leads to the recognition of the first form of lawful order which is the essence of wisdom.

In order to illustrate this thesis historically, Salutati introduces the example of the Macedonian king Archelaos, who left to the poet Euripides the planning of the whole state.<sup>50</sup> Through poetry, men are "diverted from that which their senses present to them."<sup>51</sup> Salutati repeatedly emphasizes this effect of poetry, "to divert men from their senses," "to make them believe something opposite to that which they experience with their own eyes."<sup>52</sup> It is just this

47. *Diodorus Siculus*, 4.22.

48. Coluccio Salutati, *De laboribus Herculis*, ed. B. L. Ullmann (Zurich, 1951). I.1, p.3.

49. *Ibid.*, I.1, p.3.

50. *Ibid.*, I.11, p.6.

51. *Ibid.*, I.15, p.7.

52. *Ibid.*, I.18, p.8.

"illusion" that lifts men from their condition of savagery. The world, the sky and the stars, with their mythic designations, become "humanized". Earth and the human world stand here in a fundamental interrelationship through the rise of "being-there". The poetic word founds historical space and the times that accrue to this space.<sup>53</sup> But is not this function of fantasy which depends upon the senses in fact deception? Salutati does not respond to this question with a rational metaphysical argument, but rather only points to the series of works created by the poet: human society in its historicity.<sup>54</sup>

For Salutati the deepest meaning is hidden under the surface of poetry. When he speaks of truth in this context, he does not mean logical truth, but the self-revelation of the human world. "The seers (*vates*) witness three things from the height of their intellects whereby they ornament their history as with lights — God, the world and the spiritual — and thereby name everything that they call a creature."<sup>55</sup> In the unhiddenness which the poetic statement reveals to us, gods, things and creatures appear with their original meaning. But here we must ask, if we are to speak of gods, with what gods are we concerned? Salutati's answer is that it is a single indivisible God, revealed differently in different historical forms in different times and places. "But since they (the poets) saw that God, the architect of the whole world, completed everything in wisdom . . . and yet wisdom is nothing other than God himself, they called God by different names although they felt that it was one and the same . . . so it should not seem doubtful to anyone that even with such a large number of gods, the poets did not think of many, but of just one. But they variously named this God because of the divergent variety of his tasks, times and places."<sup>56</sup>

### 3. *The philosophical sense of the thesis of Muses as Origin of Knowledge.*

The problem which arises here is the following: as a function of which faculty of man does the specifically human reality arise? Has this faculty anything to do with the metaphorical activity of the poet and in this way with poetic speech? But what is the original root of poetic speech? To answer this question, we have to go back to the traditional enumeration of the elements of human knowledge.

53. *Ibid.*, I.22, p.16.

54. *Ibid.*, I.17.

55. *Ibid.*, II, p.587 (first ed. I.9).

56. *Ibid.*, II, p.580 (first ed. I.11).

In *The Labor of Hercules*, Salutati examines the ancient tradition of the Muses as a means of understanding the origin of learning and knowledge. On first glance, his comment strikes us as odd, and one may think that he was trying to avoid a philosophical discussion. I will not enter into the purely historical problem of the extent to which Salutati's interpretation of the function of the Muses goes back to the thought of Fulgentius and M. Capella and to what degree it differs from them. The Muses belong to those constants of the literary tradition found through the ages, but they do not have to do only with the field of poetry; they apply to all the higher forms of the life of the mind. To live with the Muses, as Cicero states, is to live humanistically.<sup>57</sup> There are, of course, very contradictory views or traditions concerning the Muses: Hesiod's Muses are different from Homer's; Empedocles' are different from those of Theocritus. But they nonetheless represent a purely spiritual principle. In Cicero, it is stated that all the higher forms of the mind, hence philosophy as well, must stand under the sign of the Muses.

When Salutati returns to the tradition of the Muses, he makes it clear from the outset that he does not intend to discuss the problem of the origin of knowledge on the basis of the method of a rational metaphysics. An initial look at the text reveals a striking fact. Contrary to every expectation, Salutati does not interpret the individual Muses as the respective sources of the individual sciences. Rather, he claims that it is only the Muses in their totality which provide the presupposition of learning and knowledge. Their complete presence is what makes the search for knowledge possible and insures the attainment of a "perfect teaching".<sup>58</sup>

Salutati's own arbitrary etymologies of the names of the individual Muses need not be presented here; some examples will suffice. Clio, the first Muse to be named, represents the urge for fame.<sup>59</sup> Euterpe, the second of the Muses, refers to the happy desire to learn.<sup>60</sup> Melpomene stands for continuous effort in the pursuit of studies.<sup>61</sup> In concluding his discussion, Salutati once again recounts the nine functions of the Muses in regard to learning and knowledge: "So that science can be perfected, it is most important to want to learn with pleasure, to persevere, to perceive, to remember the perceived, to find something out from all these, to make a judgment about what has been found out, and finally to make a selection."<sup>62</sup>

57. Cicero, *Tusculanae* V.23.66.

58. Salutati, *De laboribus Hercules*, I.9.10 and I.9.44.

59. *Ibid.*, I.9.10.

60. *Ibid.*, I.9.11.

61. *Ibid.*, I.9.12.

62. *Ibid.*, I.9.14.

What does “find something out from the perceived” mean here? What is the structure of the *inventio*, of “finding”? We see that the first three Muses represent the personal attitude in learning and knowing (urge for fame: Clio; wanting or striving in happy pursuit: Euterpe; perseverance: Melpomene). The other six Muses, on the other hand, symbolize capacities (Talia), “the finding of what is common”, (Erato).<sup>63</sup> We realize here that the faculty of finding has as its object “similar things”. But what does this mean?

In order to pursue this problem, I would like to examine more closely Salutati’s comments about the fifth Muse, Polyhymnia, and her relationship to the sixth one, Erato. Polyhymnia mainly symbolizes the retention of what is perceived,<sup>64</sup> but this does not exhaust the essence of knowledge. As Salutati writes: “He is not, however, a man of knowledge who is incapable of *breaking through* what he has experienced to the discovery of *similar things*.”<sup>65</sup> The retention or recollection of what has been experienced only leads to knowledge, therefore, when it “breaks through”, to a “finding out” of what is similar. The sentence that follows explicates the relationship between finding what is similar and knowledge: “For what would it mean to remain only with the parts and not with something that is worthy of our efforts, namely, with putting together what results from imitating what is perceived and then moving *from one similar thing to the next*.”<sup>66</sup> “Finding out” what is *common*, seeing what is *similar*, provides the presupposition of metaphorical thought and speech (because only in function of a similarity is a transfer, a metaphor, possible) and leads to learning and knowledge which arises from the application of the *similitude* in whose light reality is read. “Finding out” lets us see the “similitude” between our needs and what our sense organs present us, so that in this light we are able to transfer significances (meanings) to reality. In today’s terminology, we might say it is the “finding out” which supplies us the “code” on the basis of which the transfer (metaphor) becomes possible, and this is the source of human knowledge.

But what leads to finding out, to seeing the similitude? It is the activity of ingenuity which allows us to see what corresponds to the claim of our needs. Salutati has already said before that the poet from his broad ingenuity<sup>67</sup> unveils to us the historicity of the world. Therefore ingenuity — which allows the transposition of significances on the basis of *similitudines* — is the root of the poetic, metaphorical word which “opens” the realm in which originally

63. *Ibid.*, I.9.12-13.

64. *Ibid.*, I.9.12.

65. *Ibid.*, I.9.12.

66. *Ibid.*, I.9.12.

67. *Ibid.*, II, p.587 (first ed. I.9).

the sense of things appears. It represents the preeminence of inventive over rational activity, of the metaphorical over the deductive capacity: a kind of philosophizing which has nothing to do with the traditional metaphysic. It will be G. B. Vico, who three hundred years after *Salutati*, recognizes the essence of this humanistic tradition.

4. *G. B. Vico (1668-1744): Theory of the Preeminence of Poetic Language.*

At the end of the humanist tradition, G. B. Vico (1668-1744) recognized this thesis as the essential content of humanism and made it the basis of his *New Science*: "The capacity to know is the *ingenium*. It provides man with the capacity to see the similar and to create . . . Hence, *ingenium* is necessary for invention because it is the work of a single *ingenium* to invent new things . . . Fantasy is the eye of the *ingenium*."<sup>68</sup> *Ingenium* as the basis for metaphor is the original form of knowledge. Vico recognizes that beings are not the starting point of an original form of metaphysical thought, but rather that beings appear as unconcealed in the light of metaphorical images, through the claim of human needs. Vico writes: "*Ingenium* and nature meant the same thing to the Italians. This is because the human *ingenium* is itself the nature of man. . . Those who excel in this capacity were called *ingegneri* by the Italians."<sup>69</sup> Metaphorical activity plays a central role in this process. It provides, on the basis of similarities, the images in whose light we "read" reality.

With his *New Science*, Vico does not sketch out an anthropology or merely a "new" theory of history, but rather the problem of the original unhiddenness in which man appears, and its roots. He treats this problem from the standpoint of a twofold question. On the one hand he is interested in the essence and structure of the clearing in which human history appears, and on the other hand in the primacy of the poetic word. Man breaks out of nature through startling fear as the experience of his own alienation from nature — the primordial forest — in order to create the first place of his historicity: the "new" world which arises from man's ingenious and imaginative activity and its institutions. According to Vico "the first cities, which were all founded on cultivated fields, arose as a result of families being quite withdrawn for a long time, and hidden among the sacred terrors of the religious forests. These (cultivated fields) are found among all the ancient gentile nations and, by an idea common to all, were called by the Latin peoples

68. G. B. Vico, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia* (Bari, 1914), p.183.

69. *Ibid.*, p.179.

*luci*, meaning burnt lands within the enclosure of the woods."<sup>70</sup> In another passage, Vico adds that "the first fire lit on them was that which served to clear the forest of the trees and bring them under cultivation."<sup>71</sup> Thus the original unhiddenness, the openness in which human history appears, has its origin in the experience of his own alienation from nature. But through what did he organize the "new" world after the alienation from nature?

The problem is now (and this problem is that of the humanist tradition which we tried to point out, and which culminates in Vico's treatment): why does Vico say that human beings live primarily in a world of imagination? Why do ingenuity and imagination belong, from the very beginning, to the cognition and formation of the human world? The part played by imagination in creating the human world and its history is substantiated by Vico, among other things, through his well-known statement that the very first language was a language of imagination or, in other words, that the first people were poets: "The fundamental principle of the origin of languages, as well as letters, is shown by the fact that the first gentile people . . . were poets who spoke in poetic characters . . . Poetic characters of this type appear in the form of imaginative genera and universals (or images, mainly of animate beings . . . formed by their imagination) to which they reduced all species or particular dispositions."<sup>72</sup>

We must now ask ourselves what Vico meant when he said that man originally thought in a poetic experience, i.e., in imaginative genera and universals, rather than in rational concepts. The terms genera and universals belong to the tools of traditional logic, which aim, by a process of abstraction (revealing common properties) to classify and subdivide individual objects into species and genera in order to grasp the essence or common factor existing within different elements and forming the prerequisite of their definition. The fantastic, imaginative concept (the "conceiving" or "comprehending" that leads to a definition) grasps and circumscribes within itself a multiplicity through an image, so that it expresses the essence in terms of universals: for example, lion as the essence of strength, head as the essence of height. So in the "imaginative concept", a being is crystallized through the metaphorical act as a direct vision of a pictorial whole. Vico says: "Poetic wisdom, which was the first truth of the gentile world, had to begin with a kind of metaphysics, not as an abstract, rational type like that of the scholars, but one

70. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, rev. Bergin and Fisch (Ithaca, 1968), par. 16.

71. *Ibid.*, par. 17.

72. *Ibid.*, par. 34.

felt with the senses and presented by the imagination, as would befit those first men who possessed no reflection but very strong senses and powerful imaginations."<sup>73</sup>

From a purely factual point of view, we can point out that the justification of speaking of a logic of imagination as opposed to a rational logic lies in the following awareness: the noun "logic" comes from the verb *legein*, that is, "to select" and "to collect". The rational process of establishing relationships consists in combining and connecting related things and separating non-related things. Explanation and proof are the results of a process of derivation of relations on the basis of given premises. In the logic of imagination, on the other hand, the act of putting into relationship (*legein*) "things that are remote from one another" is the result of an immediate, original connection, a connection which, because of its immediacy, can appear only in the form of a momentary vision, or in other words, an image.

For Vico — as the climax of the humanist tradition — it is the imaginative word that gives rise to the world of human "being-there". The poetic word is the original and uniquely human attempt to give meaning to the frightful power of being which reveals itself in what is. Only by attempting to conquer this power can the historical world arise. "We find that the principle of the origin both of language and letters lies in the fact that the first gentile people . . . were poets who spoke in poetic characters . . . We discover in them true poetic sentences, which must be sentiments clothed in the greatest passions and therefore full of sublime and arousing wonder."<sup>74</sup>

For this reason, Vico pointed out that philosophers and philologists should have begun with a study of poetic wisdom — which was the first truth of the heathen — in the investigation of ancient philosophy, and not with the abstract and reasoned truth of scholars.

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73. *Ibid.*, par. 371.

74. *Ibid.*, See also E. Grassi, *Die Macht des Bildes* (München, 2nd ed. 1979); *Die Macht der Phantasie* (Königstein/Th., 1979); *Rhetoric as Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition* (University Park, Pa., 1980); "The priority of common sense and imagination," *Social Research*, 43 (1976); "Critical philosophy or topical philosophy" in *G. B. Vico: An international Symposium* (1969); "Can rhetoric provide a new basis for philosophizing? The Humanist Tradition," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 11 (1978), nos. 1 and 2; "Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism". *Four Studies. Medieval and Renaissance Textes and Studies* (Binghamton, New York, 1983). See also Donald P. Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca, New York, 1981).