



From *Huponoia* to Paranoia: On the Secular Co-optation of Homeric Religion in Vico, Feuerbach, and Freud.

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Herodotus tells us that the Greeks got their notions of the gods from Homer and Hesiod, “who gave the gods their names, determined their spheres and functions, and described their outward forms” (*Histories* 2.53). For philosophers like Xenophanes of Colophon and Plato, the problem with the pervasive influence of such poetry is that it propagates a shocking theology that misleads people into believing the worst human sins are prevalent among the Olympian divinities. Classicists are of course aware of the ancient strategies for dealing with the negativity generated by this scandalous religious horizon. In the Kallipolis, poets will simply have to follow a rational theology and produce poetry that follows the basic *tupoi* of utterances about the divine: god is only good and the cause of good, god is changeless, god is true and truthful. But others in antiquity chose to take the outrageous surface of Homeric-Hesiodic myth as a kind of hermeneutical *Ansatz*, a signal of absurdity (*atopía, to apemphainon*) that the wise can follow in order to get at the *huponoia* or “undersense” of the myth. The truth of Homeric poetry can thus be converted to an account of *phusis* (as was reputedly one of the strategies of Theagenes of Rhegium) or a metaphysical narrative of the soul and its imperiled state in the world of matter (Porphyry’s *In the Cave of the Nymphs*), or any of the many meta-narratives and meta-verities detailed by the allegorist Heraclitus. We find that after the creeping Christianization of ancient culture, these two options—utter rejection (e.g., Justin Martyr, *Exhortation to the Greeks*) and tendentious allegoresis (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*)—remained available.

This, as I said, is well known to classical scholars, thanks in part to the work of researchers like Robert Lamberton (*Homer the Theologian*) and James Coulter (*The Literary Microcosm*). But I wish in this paper to trace a broader trajectory of this story, one that would link the horizon of Homeric religion with the growing secularization of Western European culture during the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. One thread of this secularization is the “naturalization” of mythopoeia, that is, conceiving of

the mythopoeic impulse as a natural human capacity to narrativize the human experience of the world, instead of just an aspect of benighted heathendom or collective idiocy. Homeric-Hesiodic anthropomorphism, which was the basis of the scandal of Olympian religion, suddenly became a kind of virtue, once certain humanistic biases began to look for a primal language of human thought that was closer to nature and at odds with the arbitrary views of Christian authority. On the hermeneutical horizon, this led away from a hunt for arcane truths in the Homeric text (based on the notion that Homer hints—*ainittetai*—at things he knows) toward the idea that the truths are in a sense naive and unconscious ones, but ones with a certain human dignity to them. In other words, this new hermeneutical stance led to the psychologizing of Homeric religion and the privileging of it as a primal scene of human imagination and self-understanding, making it available for different kinds of humanistic intervention. While initially this psychologizing is done optimistically, underlining the benignly human “nature” of human “culture,” gradually the mythical world of Homer and Hesiod will emerge by the beginning of the twentieth century as a means of pathologizing this human nature and setting it at odds with the process of civilization/culture (what Freud calls simply *Kultur*).

There are chiefly three phases to my discussion. The first details the emergence in Vico’s *Scienza Nuova* (1744) of an intrinsic appreciation for the *sapienza poetica* embodied in the Homeric poems as representative of a particular way of thinking, one openly compared to a childlike mentality and a bodily language. The second describes the robust emergence of a theory of psychological projection to describe the phenomenon of religion overall in the work of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), a highly influential post-Hegelian philosopher, who first broadcast the idea systematically that wish-fulfillment is at the heart of religious systems. In a very important work (which is neglected on account of its enormous philological detail), *Theogonie nach den Quellen des klassischen, hebräischen und christlichen Altertums* (1857), Feuerbach uses the first book of the *Iliad* as a kind of primal scene of wish-fulfillment that he then traces in vast detail through a host of Greek, Roman, Hebrew, and early Christian texts, all in the light of his anti-religious polemic more famously formulated before this work (*Das Wesen des Christentums* [1841] in particular). Lastly, I trace in the work of Sigmund Freud how Feuerbach’s still-optimistic project of human enlightenment turns into a tragic description of the incommensurability of human desire (at base a product of human nature) in the context of human civilization, and how “the unconscious language of myth” previously postulated in the nineteenth century becomes a dynamic, urgent issue in the hands of psychoanalysis.

I. Vico and *La sapienza poetica*

My imagination grows when I read Vico as it doesn't when I read Freud or Jung. —James Joyce

I see the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) as a point of departure not because he is “foundational” for the discourse I am tracing in the same manner that Plato is foundational for philosophy or Homer for Western poetry. Vico’s influence is sporadic though wide-ranging, encompassing such disparate figures as Jules Michelet, Friedrich von Savigny, Karl Marx, Benedetto Croce, Matthew Arnold, Ernst Cassirer, James Joyce, Erich Auerbach and, most recently, Edward Said. In spite of this list of enthusiasts, Vico cannot be seen in simple causal terms as the historical prime mover that impelled the study of myth toward the kind of mythopoeic naturalism I seek to describe. Rather, I begin with Vico because he represents a complex figure of transition from the allegorical tradition of ancient lineage that imputed arcane wisdom to ancient myth towards a new tradition, one that sought rather what he termed *la sapienza poetica* or “poetic wisdom” and also—perhaps more importantly—*la sapienza volgare* or “popular wisdom.” The moment of transition can be captured vividly in Vico’s reading of Francis Bacon’s *De sapientia veterum* (1609) around the year 1707. Bacon’s treatise followed a strategy going back to antiquity of reading ancient myths as repositories of arcane knowledge. It begins by declaring:

Antiquitatem primaeuam, (exceptis quae in Sacris literis habemus) Obliuio & Silentium inuoluit; Silentia Antiquitatis, Fabulae poetarum exceperunt: Fabulis tandem successere Scripta quae habemus, Adeo vt Antiquitatis Penetralia, & recessus à sequentium Saeculorum Memoria, & euidentia tanquam Velo Fabularum discreta & separata sint; quod se interposuit, & obiecit medium, inter ea quae perierunt, & ea quae extant. (1609: Praefatio, p. 1[unnumbered in text])

The Antiquities of the first age (except those we find in sacred Writ) were buried in obliuion and silence: silence was succeeded by Poeticall fables; and Fables againe were followed by the Records we now enioy. So that the mysteries and secrets of Antiquity were distinguished and separated from the Records and Euidences of succeeding times, by the vaile of fiction which interposed it selfe and came betweene those things which perished, and those which are extant. (1619: Preface, p. 1).

As is evident from this opening paragraph, Bacon assumes there are inner recesses within the poetic *fabulae* that can only be accessed by rending the *velum* that has “interposed itself” between the present and the past. Though we commonly see in Bacon the arch-empiricist who rejects the authority of ancient tradition in favor of experimental method, the fact is that *De sapientia veterum* displays a highly reverential attitude toward

authorial intention and poetic wisdom. While he rejected the systematic allegoresis of the Stoics as being wide of the mark, he still upheld the notion of an intended undersense in myth. First of all, since Scripture uses parables (or “veils and shades”), he claimed outright that anyone rejecting such devices would remove any possibility of contact between the human and the Divine (*Hoc enim prophanum quiddam sonat, & audax, cùm huiusmodi velis & vmbris Religio gaudeat, vt qui eas tollat, Commercia diuinorum, & humanorum ferè interdicat*—1609: *Praefatio*, p. 3). Secondly, he saw too much evidence in the myths themselves of a coincidence of structure, similitude and appropriateness in names to deny that there is some hidden mystery and original allegory (*Mysterium, & Allegoriam iam ab origine*) contained in them; indeed, their construction is so fitting and clear that no one could categorically deny that their undersense was deliberately placed there from the start (*reperio coniunctionem...tam aptam & tam claram; vt sensum illum ab initio praeceptum & cogitatum fuisse, & et de industriâ adumbratum, nemo constantèr negauerit*—1609: *Praefatio*, p. 3).

Already in Bacon, however, we can see a move away from a hierophantic reading of the poetic tradition and the assertion of something Vico would greatly expand. Bacon noted that the use of parables has been twofold and in a remarkable sense, contradictory. For parables work on the one hand toward concealment and veiling, while on the other they introduce light and illustration. For his own purposes, he discards the former use and establishes that poetic *fabulae* are things composed for pleasure and delectation, and are therefore very useful to the sciences and even necessary. In earlier times, human understanding was rude and needed things to be put directly before the senses, hence parables were deployed for the purposes of teaching; just as hieroglyphs came before letters, so too parables came before arguments.

Itaque Antiquis Saeculis, cùm rationis humanae inuenta, & conclusiones etiam eae quae nunc tritae & vulgatae sunt, tunc temporis nouae & insuetae essent, omnia Fabularum omnigenûm, & Aenigmatum & Parabolarum, & Similitudinum plena erant: atque per haec docendi ratio, non occultandi artificium quaesitum est; rudibus scilicet tunc temporis hominum ingenijs, & subtilitatis, nisi quae sub sensum cadebat, impatientibus, & ferè incapacibus. Nam vt Hieroglyphica Literis, ita Parabolae Argumentis erant antiquiora. Atque etiam nunc, si quis nouam in aliquibus lucem humanis mentibus affundere velit, idque non incommodè & asperè, prorsus eâdem viâ insistendum est, & ad similitudinum auxilia confugiendum. (1609: *Praefatio*, pp. 8-9; original emphasis)

Therefore in the first ages (when many humane inuentions and conclusions, which are now common and vulgar, were new and not generally knowen) all things were full of Fables, aenigmaes, parables, and similies of all sortes: by which they sought to teach and lay open, not to hide and conceale knowledge, especially, seeing the

understandings of men were in those times rude and impatient, and almost incapable of any subtilties, such things onely excepted, as were the objects of sense: for as Hieroglyphicks preceded letters, so parables were more ancient then Arguments. And in these daies also, he that would illuminate mens minds anew in any old matter, and that not with disprofit and harshnesse, must absolutely take the same course, and use the help of similies. (1619: Preface, pp. 9-10; original emphasis)

So Bacon already suggests two matters of chief interest to me: 1) that myth is an outgrowth of a primeval form of reasoning and 2) it is linked to a more bodily, sensate method of understanding. While he thus comes close to linking the meaning of *fabulae* to a common or popular wisdom, he never entirely gives up the notion of individual poetic genius that expresses itself in the tales, i.e., a wisdom that is deeper, subtler and recondite. The parable remains of use to the sciences chiefly for its ability to communicate to the human intellect whatever is abstruse and far removed from the common opinions of society.

In his own words, Vico “by the reading of Bacon of Verulam’s treatise *On the Wisdom of the Ancients*, more ingenious and learned than true, was incited to look for its principles farther back than in the fables of the poets” (1963:148). This led a few years later to the writing of a very crucial Latin work that bears the telling title *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia ex linguae latinae originibus eruenda* (1710), a text that attempts through etymology to disclose certain primeval truths that serve a clear philosophical purpose (besides Bacon, Plato’s *Cratylus* is a clear influence as is Varro’s *Origines*). By “demonstrating” the synonymy or “convertibility” of *verum* and *factum* in Latin, Vico enunciates a first principle of historical epistemology quite at variance with the principle of “clear and distinct ideas” expounded at the time by Descartes and his followers; namely, that the true is what is made, that the only certain human knowledge—*pace* Descartes—is of what humans do or make, namely, history and civilization. To make a long story terribly short, Vico was to elaborate this principle into a whole project for a new science of humanity most famously captured in the 1744 edition of his *magnum opus*, *Principj di Scienza Nuova d’intorno alla commune natura delle nazioni*, a work meant to be for the human sciences what Isaac Newton’s *Principia mathematica* represented for the natural sciences.

But whereas in *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia* Vico still sought primary philosophical truths in the primitive language of the Italic peoples, by the time he wrote the *Scienza Nuova* he had instead come to see poetry as the hidden source of all subsequent forms of knowledge, part of a primitive culture where imagination has the upper hand over reason and the mental faculties that later forms of civilization put to the fore. This change is responsible, then, for the sudden primacy of Homer as a topic in his work, a theme that occupies the third of the five books in the 1744 edition. The centrality

of Homer to the architectonics of this complex project is hardly an accident. In the frontispiece of the last two editions, a figurative emblem characteristic of the times clearly features a statue of Homer struck from behind by a divine light reflected off a figure of Metaphysics (see Figure 1). The statue rests on a cracked pedestal, which Vico says represents the discovery of the true Homer, which until this time has remained hidden. It is worth citing in full what Vico symbolizes in this emblem of Homer, as it announces well before the full discussion in book 2 the topic of poetic wisdom:

Lo stesso raggio si risparge da petto della metafisica nella statua d’Omero, primo autore della gentilità che ci sia pervenuto, perché, in forza della metafisica (la quale si è fatta da capo sopra una storia dell’idee umane, da che cominciaron tal’uomini a umanamente pensare), si è da noi finalmente disceso nelle menti balorde de’ primi fondatori delle nazioni gentili, tutti robustissimi sensi e vastissime fantasie; e – per questo istesso che non avevan altro che la sola facultà, e pur tutta stordita e stupida, di poter usare l’umana mente e ragione - da quelli che se ne sono finor pensati si truovano tutti contrari, nonché diversi, i princìpi della poesia dentro i finora, per quest’istesse cagioni, nascosti princìpi della sapienza poetica, o sia la scienza de’ poeti teologi, la quale senza contrasto fu la prima sapienza del mondo per gli gentili.
(par. 6)¹

Figure 1) Frontispiece to the 1744 edition of the *Scienza Nuova*



The same ray [of divine providence] is reflected from the breast of metaphysic onto the statue of Homer, the first gentile author who has come down to us. For metaphysic, which has been formed from the beginning according to a history of human ideas from the commencing of truly human thinking among the gentiles, has enabled us finally to descend into the crude minds of the first founders of the gentile nations, all robust sense and vast imagination. They had only the bare potentiality, and that torpid and stupid, of using the human mind and reason. From that very cause the beginnings of poetry, not only different from but contrary to those which have been hitherto imagined, are found to lie in the beginnings of poetic wisdom, which have from that same cause been

¹ Vico’s *Scienza Nuova* is a text with a fairly bewildering organization and complicated history, hence it is customary to cite the text according to the modern paragraph numeration common to both the Italian and English editions. References in Italian are to the fourth revised edition edited by Fausto Nicolini and based on the 1744 third edition plus manuscript material. English references are to the final revised and unabridged translation by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Fisch (1968).

hitherto hidden from us. This poetic wisdom, the knowledge of the theological poets, was unquestionably the first wisdom of the world for the gentiles. (par. 6).

Thus from the very first page of the work, Vico casts Homer at us as a figure of primacy tied to an *antiquissima sapientia*, but one now seen in a new light as a primitive “poetic wisdom” that characterizes the first age of the gentile world (the Hebrews’ world of revealed truth is a different matter). Two features of prime importance are 1) the association of this early wisdom with the childhood of the human race (an association that will gather considerable strength in the much altered scientific landscape of Freud’s day), and 2) that the understanding of this age is shaped by the conditions of embodiment (since the first peoples *erano quasi tutti corpo e quasi niuna riflessione* [par. 819]) and what is directly experienced, grows directly from innate imitative capacities, and is powerfully informed by the imagination and the passions. On the one hand, this means that the prior stage of civilization must be understood in its own terms—and here Vico parts company with those learned allegorists who remake heroic poetry in their own philosophical image. But on the other hand, it is clear that, just as childhood is very different from adulthood, the experiences of the former are foundational to the latter. Hence while Vico edges toward a certain historicism in approach, at the same time he holds to the notion that there is a common link between human societies that his new science will trace. Among the axioms or *degnità* of his first book, is the apodictic assertion that “There must in the nature of human institutions be a mental language common to all nations, which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects” (par. 161). He goes on to assert “This common mental language is proper to our Science, by whose light linguistic scholars will be enabled to construct a mental vocabulary common to all the various articulate languages living and dead” (par. 162). Moreover, Vico has discovered a vital central fact: “the first gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters,” an insight that empowers his broad reading of mythology and constitutes the “master key” of his new science (*la chiave maestra di questa scienza*—par. 34). This implicates Homer in a wider comparative study of mythology, linking things Greek and Roman with primitive Germanic practices related by Tacitus and reports on Amerindian customs and beliefs (e.g. par. 473-482).

Though Vico seeks commonalities that link the disparate civilizations of history together into a total picture, it is the essential difference of the primitive age he first explicates in other *degnità* stated at the outset of this study. A number of them essentially sketch the nature of early humanity as engaged in a kind of *bricolage*. Men are naturally impelled to preserve the memories of their laws and institutions (par. 201)—hence poetry is very early linked to memory and historical consciousness. All barbarian histories have fabulous beginnings (par. 202); the human mind is naturally impelled to

take delight in uniformity (par. 204)—which is responsible for the narrativizing of disparate facts and events into coherent stories. Children naturally filter all subsequent experience through the ideas and names of the first people and things they encounter (par. 206)—meaning that the tendency to unify things in the form of poetic characters is tantamount to a primitive scheme of classification. In children, memory is extremely vigorous (*vigorosissima*), hence their fantasy is vivid to excess (*vivida all'eccesso*), since imagination is nothing other than expanded or compounded memory (par. 211)—this explains the vigorous expressiveness of the poetic images to be found in the primitive age, what Vico calls deliberately *il primo mondo fanciullo*. And finally, children excel in imitation and regularly amuse themselves by imitating whatever they apprehend (par. 215), which “demonstrates” that the primitive world was one of poetic nations, since poetry is nothing but imitation (*Questa dignità dimostra che 'l mondo fanciullo fu di nazioni poetiche, non essendo altro la poesia che imitazione*). What is apparent in this *bricolage* is that primitive poetry represents a social condition of knowledge, or what we today would term a “mentality” or *episteme*, that hangs between human ignorance and human knowing, in conformity with the very first axioms of the book: “Because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance man makes himself the measure of all things” (par. 120), and “whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand” (par. 122).

Perhaps the most startling feature of Vico’s historical anthropology is his highly active and creative view of memory, one that we cannot help but see in relation to Freud’s equally dynamic model. “Memory thus has three aspects: memory when it remembers things, imagination when it alters or imitates them, and invention when it gives them a new turn or puts them into proper arrangement and relationship. For these reasons the theological poets called Memory the mother of the Muses” (par. 819). Thus the poetry of the heroic age is defined as a kind of creative memory—a record of the past, to be sure, one that is universally practiced by all the *fanciulli delle nazioni*, but one that also implies a constant degree of imaginative distortion. This is particularly important in reference to the anthropomorphism in Greek mythology that generates the age-old negativity of Homeric religion.

Gli uomini le cose dubbie ovvero oscure, che lor appartengono, naturalmente interpretano secondo le loro nature e quindi uscite passioni e costumi.

Questa dignità è un gran canone della nostra mitologia, per lo quale le favole, trovate da' primi uomini selvaggi e crudi tutte severe, convenevolmente alla fondazione delle nazioni che venivano dalla feroce libertà bestiale, poi, col lungo volger degli anni e cangiar de' costumi, furon impropiate, alterate, oscurate ne' tempi dissoluti e corrotti anco innanzi d'Omero. Perché agli uomini greci importava la religione, temendo di non avere gli dèi così contrari a' loro voti come contrari

eran a' loro costumi, attaccarono i loro costumi agli dèi, e diedero sconci, laidi, oscenissimi sensi alle favole. (par. 220-221)

Whatever appertains to men but is doubtful or obscure, they naturally interpret according to their own natures and the passions and customs springing from them.

This axiom is a great canon of our mythology. According to it, the fables originating among the first savage and crude men were very severe, as suited the founding of nations emerging from a fierce bestial freedom. Then, with the long passage of years and change of customs, they lost their original meanings and were altered and obscured in the dissolute and corrupt times [beginning] even before Homer. Because religion was important to them, the men of Greece, lest the gods should oppose their desires as well as their customs, imputed these customs to the gods, and gave improper, ugly, and obscene meanings to the fables. (par. 220-221).

In essence, Vico approaches in his views of primitive society a theory of projection in the formation of mythology, but one that is built around the historical truth of poetic texts as a kind of elaborated memory. Instead of straightforward Euhemerism, Vico's "poetic characters" of the gods are rather personalized condensations of historical notions and ideas that are perhaps closer to Jung's archetypes, which become emplotted in traditional tales according to the innate operations of the primitive mind and are then altered as human character changes. This creates a space for what Freud would later term the "historical truth" of his patients' mental constructions and personal mythologies, by which we come to read these fantastical texts as containing at some disturbed core the truth of the past, the psychological reality of conflict and compromise. Since memory is an active and deeply psychological process for both Vico and Freud, the work of the new science (Vico's *scienza nuova* as well as Freud's psychoanalytic *Wissenschaft*) is one of recovery:

Le tradizioni volgari devon avere avuto pubblici motivi di vero, onde nacquero e si conservarono da intieri popoli per lunghi spazi di tempi.

Questo sarà altro grande lavoro di questa Scienza: di ritruovarne i motivi del vero, il quale, col volger degli anni e col cangiare delle lingue e costumi, ci pervenne ricoverto di falso. (par. 149-150)

Vulgar traditions must have had public grounds of truth, by virtue of which they came into being and were preserved by entire peoples over long periods of time.

It will be another great labor of this Science to recover these grounds of truth—truth which, with the passage of years and the changes in languages and customs, has come down to us enveloped in falsehood. (par. 149-150)

Though I don't want to stretch my comparison with Freud too much at this stage, it is worth citing in light of the above this comment he made to his *alter ego*, Wilhelm Fliess: "You taught me that a kernel of truth lurks behind every absurd popular belief" (Masson 1985: 193).

It is no surprise, then, to find that the third book on Homer is in fact a work of historical recovery, as its title states: *Della scoperta del vero Omero*. Students of the infamous "Homeric question" are of course familiar with Vico's surprising anticipation of the issue of collective authorship, his scenario of the rhapsodes or "song-stitchers" acting as the voices of popular tradition, and finally his synthetic characterization of Homer neither as a pure fiction nor an identifiable individual, but rather as "an idea or a heroic character of Grecian men insofar as they told their histories in song" (par. 873). "Homer" is the name of a textual process, something akin to Foucault's "author function"—namely, "the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning" (1979:159). The patent inconsistencies, theological scandals, myriad dialectal differences, varying geographical points of view, and other textual problems are elided together under the authorship of "Homer," whereas the reality is that the Greeks themselves were this "Homer" (*essi popoli greci furono quest'Omero*— par. 875). Vico sees the Pisistratid recension of the text as very telling in itself, a political attempt to put order on the textual proliferation: "The Pisistratids, tyrants of Athens, divided and arranged the poems of Homer, or had them divided and arranged, into [two groups,] the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Hence we may understand what a confused mass of material they must have been before, when the difference we can observe between the styles of the two poems is infinite" (par. 853).

For Vico, Homer is a problem to be fixed, but it can neither be resolved with the traditional philosophical resources, nor can one trust the philologists to reach the real heart of the matter. It is rather in the marriage of philosophy and philology, the quest for the eternal truth and the quest for the historically certain, that the Homeric problem acquires its proper significance. The tradition of learned allegoresis is one of the delusions of the learned (*boria de' dotti*), but the new science allows us access to the past in a newly legible form, from which the grand pattern of universal history emerges in its distinct clarity. The negativity of Homeric religion and mores remains intact, in a sense, while at the same time one gets successfully beyond it. The basic alterity of the primitive mind implies that we cannot judge the sublime works of heroic poetry by our own moral standards and theological ideas. In this sense, Vico strongly asserts a historicist principle to which he holds uncompromisingly. The first age of the world was occupied, he tells us, with the "first operation of the human mind" (par. 496), which was topical invention and not critique. Philosophical critique is a child of abstraction, and can only prosper in the wake of the richness of invention. "Thus the first peoples, who were the children of the human race, founded first the world of the arts; then the philosophers, who came a

long time afterward and so may be regarded as the old men of the nations, founded the world of the sciences, thereby making humanity complete” (par. 498). While the total picture of humanity is thus complete, the rational and imaginative ages are in a sense mutually exclusive in their fullest forms, which, Vico knows, upsets a whole tradition of poetic theory from Aristotle down to Patrizzi, Scaliger, and Castelvetro: “For it has been shown that it was deficiency of human reasoning power that gave rise to poetry so sublime that the philosophies which came afterward, the arts of poetry and of criticism, have produced none equal or better, and have even prevented its production. Hence it is Homer’s privilege to be, of all the sublime, that is, the heroic poets, the first in the order of merit as well as in that of age” (par. 384).

The civilized mind, then, has to work against its own ingrained rationality in order to grasp the “first operation” thinking of the heroic age, which, Vico clearly asserts, was closer to its own corporeality and in a sense to Nature. Behind the negativity of Homeric mythology, then, stands the inherent historical alienation of the human mind from itself through the course of its development. For the thought-world of the past is in essence falsified by the thought-world of the present.

Ma, siccome ora (per la natura delle nostre umane menti, troppo ritirata da’ sensi nel medesimo volgo con le tante astrazioni di quante sono piene le lingue con tanti vocaboli astratti, e di troppo assottigliata con l’arte dello scrivere, e quasi spiritualezzata con la pratica de’ numeri, ché volgarmente fanno di conto e ragione) ci è naturalmente negato di poter formare la vasta immagine di cotal donna che dicono “Natura simpatetica” (che mentre con la bocca dicono, non hanno nulla in lor mente, perocché la lor mente è dentro il falso, ch’è nulla, né sono soccorsi già dalla fantasia a poterne formare una falsa vastissima immagine); così ora ci è naturalmente negato di poter entrare nella vasta immaginativa di que’ primi uomini, le menti de’ quali di nulla erano astratte, di nulla erano assottigliate, di nulla spiritualezzate, perch’erano tutte immerse ne’ sensi, tutte rintuzzate dalle passioni, tutte seppellite ne’ corpi: onde dicemmo sopra ch’or appena intender si può, affatto immaginar non si può, come pensassero i primi uomini che fondarono l’umanità gentilezza. (par. 378)

But the nature of our civilized minds is so detached from the senses, even in the vulgar, by abstractions corresponding to all the abstract terms our languages abound in, and so refined by the art of writing, and as it were spiritualized by the use of numbers, because even the vulgar know how to count and reckon, that it is naturally beyond our power to form the vast image of this mistress called “Sympathetic Nature.” Men shape the phrase with their lips but have nothing in their minds; for what they have in mind is falsehood, which is nothing; and their imagination no longer avails to form a vast false image. It is equally beyond our power to enter into

the vast imagination of those first men, whose minds were not in the least abstract, refined, or spiritualized, because they were entirely immersed in the senses, butted by the passions, buried in the body. That is why we said above [par. 338] that we can scarcely understand, still less imagine, how those first men thought who founded gentile humanity. (par. 378)

All the same, Vico systematically deciphers Homer as an archive of social memory, and he does this in a way that works considerably to reduce the shocking nature of Homer's scandalous myths. The binding of Hera, for example, was a "hieroglyph or fable" that originally represented the sanctity of marriage. She was suspended in the air to signify "the auspices essential to the solemn nuptials," while the rope about her neck recalled "the violence used by the giants [the first gentiles] on the first wives" (par. 514). He goes on, "Her hands were bound in token of the subjection of wives to their husbands, later represented among all nations by the more refined symbol of the wedding ring. The heavy stones tied to her feet denoted the stability of marriage, for which Vergil calls solemn matrimony *conjugium stabile* [*Aeneid* 1.73; 4.126]." There is, then, a trace of primitive violence in marital relations here, but one softened by the exegesis of the symbolic meaning behind the upsetting suspension and torture. The negativity of this fable is rather a product of tradition, or the gradual alienation of humanity from its initial understanding: "But now this fable was taken as representing a cruel punishment inflicted by an adulterous Jove, and, with the unworthy interpretations bestowed upon it by later times with corrupted customs, it has greatly exercised the mythologists ever since" (par. 514). It is hard to tell in this case, then, whether antiquity's alien mentality or modernity's moral corruption is the real problem here. As is often the case, we see Vico sitting on the fence between a hardcore view of progressive optimism ("divine providence" leading human understanding toward its fulfillment and the completion of its humanity) and nostalgia for a simpler, purer, and sublimely imaginative past.

Similar things happen to other scandalous myths. Ganymede borne off to heaven by Jove's eagle, we are told, originally signified the contemplator of Jove's auspices; but the story changed "in corrupt times" and the boy became an ignoble pleasure of Jove (par. 515). In fact, though this first age is more bodily, mere pleasure is not the criterion of the primitive world. The virtues of the primitive age were "virtues of the senses with an admixture of religion and cruelty" (par. 516). Piety and religion made these early men prudent, just, temperate (content with one woman for their lifetime), strong, industrious, and magnanimous. It was not a time, Vico insists, when pleasure was law, "as effeminate poets later pictured it," "For in the golden age of the theological poets, men insensible to every refinement of nauseous reflection took pleasure only in what was permitted and useful, as is still the case, we observe, with peasants" (par. 516). In fact, the course of history used the very impulsion of lust to create the first kind of human society:

[P]er venir i primi alla prima di tutte, che fu quella de' matrimoni, v'abbisognarono, per farglivi entrare, i pugnentissimi stimoli della libidine bestiale e, per tenerglivi dentro, v'abbisognarono i fortissimi freni di spaventose religioni, come sopra si è dimostrato. Da che provennero i matrimoni, i quali furono la prima amicizia che nacque al mondo; onde Omero, per significare che Giove e Giunone giacquero insieme, dice con eroica gravità che tra loro "celebrarono l'amicizia" [...] (par. 554)

For in order that the first of them should reach that first kind of society which is matrimony, they had need of the sharp stimulus of bestial lust, and to keep them in it the stern restraints of frightful religions were necessary. Thus marriage emerged as the first kind of friendship in the world; whence Homer, to indicate that Jove and Juno lay together, says with heroic gravity that "they celebrated their friendship" (par. 554)

Here again we see Vico taking over one of the traditional scandals of Homeric religion, the deception and seduction of Zeus by Hera in *Iliad* XIV, as in essence the historical record of civilization encapsulated in traditional tales. The misremembered line, however, that Vico uses to support the assertion that matrimony is the first friendship is a verse we all remember quite differently: $\nu\omega\acute{\iota}$ δ' $\acute{\alpha}\gamma'$ $\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ $\phi\iota\lambda\acute{o}\tau\eta\tau\iota$ $\tau\rho\alpha\pi\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\mu\epsilon\nu$ $\acute{\epsilon}\upsilon\nu\eta\theta\acute{\epsilon}\nu\tau\epsilon$ (XIV.413), "But now let us go to bed and turn to love-making" (Lattimore), or in Lombardo's urgent American idiom, "Let's get in bed now and make love." Here Vico is clearly stepping clear of the "sweet lust" that notoriously informs the scene (cf. XIV.328— $\acute{\omega}\varsigma$ $\sigma\acute{\epsilon}\omicron$ $\nu\acute{\upsilon}\nu$ $\acute{\epsilon}\rho\alpha\mu\alpha\iota$ $\kappa\acute{\alpha}\iota$ $\mu\epsilon$ $\gamma\lambda\upsilon\kappa\upsilon\delta$ $\acute{\iota}\mu\epsilon\rho\omicron\varsigma$ $\acute{\alpha}\rho\epsilon\acute{\iota}$), leaning heavily instead on the broader etymological range of *philotês*.

Lastly, we can look to the famous case of the adultery of Ares and Aphrodite as another instance where Vico sidesteps the religious negativity of the text through his new science of historical research. Vico was avidly read by Marx for his attention to the origins of class struggle, and Livy figures prominently in his understanding of the evolution of conflict between patricians and plebeians—though Vico makes this a general condition of developing nations and not just the particular trajectory of Roman social history. Vico considers it an important canon of his mythology that there are sociological doublets of the gods Vulcan, Mars and Venus, such that in contrast to their heroic or patrician forms, there are also plebeian versions (since the plebeians used existing names of heroes, par. 581). Thus what was a theological scandal can now be seen simply as a sociological tension. In this passage, the open conflict among the Homeric gods is retained as significant in itself, but oddly the adultery of Venus is excused as being originally common law marriage:

Vulcano, che fende il capo a Giove con un colpo di scure, onde nasce Minerva, e volendosi frapparre in una contesa tra Giove e Giunone, con un calcio da Giove è precipitato dal cielo e restonne zoppo; - Marte, a cui Giove, in una forte riprensione

che gli fa appo Omero, dice essere lo più vile di tutti i dèi, e Minerva, nella contesa degli dèi, appo lo stesso poeta, il ferisce con un colpo di sasso (che devon essere stati i plebei, che servivano agli eroi nelle guerre); - e Venere (che deon essere state le mogli naturali di sì fatti plebei), che, con questo Marte plebeo, sono còlta entrambi nella rete da Vulcano eroico, e, scoperti ignudi dal Sole, sono presi a scherno dagli altri dèi. Quindi Venere fu poi con error creduta esser moglie di Vulcano: ma noi sopra vedemmo che 'n cielo non vi fu altro matrimonio che di Giove e Giunone, il quale pure fu sterile; e Marte fu detto non "adultero", ma "concubino" di Venere, perché tra' plebei non si contraevano che matrimoni naturali, come appresso si mostrerà, che da' latini furon detti "concubinati." (par. 570)

Vulcan splits Jove's head with a hatchet to give birth to Minerva, attempts to interfere in a quarrel between Jove and Juno, is kicked out of heaven by Jove, and is left lame. Mars, in a stern reproof reported by Homer (*Iliad* V.890), is called by Jove "The vilest of all the gods," and Minerva in the battle of the gods related by the same poet (*Iliad* XXI.403) hurls a stone at him and wounds him. (This Vulcan and this Mars must be the plebeians who served the heroes in war.) And Venus (signifying the natural wives of the plebeians) along with the plebeian Mars is trapped in the net of the heroic Vulcan; and, being discovered naked by the Sun, they are made the butt of the other gods. Hence Venus was erroneously believed to be the wife of Vulcan, but there was no marriage in heaven save that between Jove and Juno [par. 511], and that was sterile [par. 448]. And it was not said that Mars had committed adultery with Venus but that she was his concubine, because among the plebeians there were only natural marriages [par. 683], and these were called by the Latins concubinages. (par. 579)

I have dwelt on these details, which are the characteristic points of tension on the theological Homerizon (cf. Plato, *Republic* 377e6-378e6), in part to show how much Vico tries to eschew the tendentious allegoresis of antiquity, only to fall into the tendentiousness of his own system. But that is a point easily made and not worth arguing at such length. My more robust concern is to highlight Vico's work as an example of how Homer becomes implicated in a totalizing project of historical understanding, one that departs from the epistemological advantage of modernity (the "new science") yet relies heavily on a particular deployment of the past. The past is not self-evident; as embodied in the Homeric text, it is authoritative yet mystified, lapidary yet in need of decipherment. But when properly decoded, Homer divulges primeval truths that modernity must listen to in order to overcome its own historical alienation and be present to itself as a human (and humane) totality. There is an element of nostalgia in Vico for the brave old world of sublime imagination, one that serves as a means of delivering a critique of modern reason. But he insists that that world is lost to the rational age, though it serves as its foundation. However, given Vico's cyclical view of history, the ages of

the gods and heroes will cycle round again in the *ricorso* of the nations, hence there remains the (hopeful?) prospect of regression to the *mondo fanciullo*—one of the stranger gifts of Divine Providence to humankind.

I wish now to extend this paper by examining two more cases of attempted co-optation of Homer's primary horizon which bear more directly on the culture of emergent secular values that we can more readily recognize as our own.

II. Feuerbach's *Iliad* of Wish-fulfillment.

Religion is the childhood of man. Or better still, in religion man is a child.—Feuerbach

Vico is often seen as a precursor in the emergence of secular culture for the great emphasis he puts on the truly human fashioning of human history; and yet, he was no atheist and regularly talked about Divine Providence in his work, though it was hardly the Providence of traditional theologians. Ludwig Feuerbach, on the other hand, was a fervent advocate of a post-religious, secular culture, in a manner that was caught up quite literally with the revolutions of the nineteenth century. His *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* were delivered in the revolutionary year 1848, and his emancipatory agenda is blaringly clear: "My primary concern is and always has been to illumine the obscure essence of religion with the torch of reason, in order that man may at least cease to be the victim, the plaything, of all those hostile powers which from time immemorial have employed and are still employing the darkness of religion for the oppression of mankind" ([1848] 1967: 22). Feuerbach's strenuous fight with religion is cast overtly in terms of coming-to-consciousness, implying that the humane benefits of religion in the past were always unconsciously devised. But the being that historically has been the center of religion—the so-called god or gods—is in reality nothing other than the essence of humanity itself. "It was my purpose to demonstrate this so that man, who is always unconsciously governed and determined by his own essence alone, may in future consciously take his own, human essence as the law and determining ground, the aim and measure, of his ethical and political life" ([1848] 1967:22-23). Thus Feuerbach's concise slogan is simply: theology is anthropology ([1848] 1967:17).

Just as Vico's work is a complex response to and even inversion of the Cartesian currents of his time, Feuerbach's philosophical project is a powerful reaction to Hegel and all other forms of idealism. If Feuerbach is known to the English-speaking world at all, it is chiefly through Marx's famous "Theses on Feuerbach," which fault him for insufficient materialism and a kind of crypto-idealism of his own ([1845] 1978). But in point of fact, Feuerbach's shift away from the Hegelian focus on Spirit (*Geist*) to the material processes of history was in its day a major inspiration for the emergent

scientific, historicist, and secular culture of nineteenth-century Germany.² He is foundationalist about one thing in particular: nature. “Only in direct communion with nature can man become whole again, can he cast aside all extravagant, supernatural, and unnatural ideas and fantasies” ([1848] 1967:4). In a very real sense, this materialist bent makes him more sympathetic to pagan religions, or the so-called “nature religions,” for their direct attention to and reverence for natural processes. Christianity is the bugbear of his own situation and he attacks it for ignoring nature, for its arid idealism, for “egotism,” and for being “an edifice crowned by a natureless God or spirit who makes the world by merely thinking and willing” ([1848] 1967:19). His earlier writings *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) and *The Essence of Religion* (1845) sought to exploit the difference between Judeo-Christian monotheism and paganism by showing how nature religions put nature to the fore, and that this is humane and reasonable since it is nature that humankind intuitively sees as the ordered and order-giving entity in the universe. Thus science and art derive only from polytheism, since the polytheistic sensibility (*Sinn*) is “the open, generous apprehension [*Sinn*] of all that is beautiful and good without distinction, the sensibility [*Sinn*] for the world, for the universe” ([1841] 1959:137). The modern scientist’s material focus on nature is really no different from the pagan worship of nature, since idolatry was the first way of contemplating nature (*Naturanschauung*). In one of his many lapidary slogans in *The Essence of Christianity*, he declares outright “the study of nature is the worship of nature” (*Naturstudium ist Naturdienst*—[1841] 1959:139). Not surprisingly, then, Greek religion is very useful to him in disclosing the real essence of religion, a disclosure that is then used as a club to beat contemporary Christian culture. And it would be hard to understate the beating he gives it, seeing that his goal is “to transform theologians into anthropologists, lovers of God into lovers of man, candidates for the next world into students of this world, religious and political flunkies of heavenly and earthly monarchs and lords into free, self-reliant citizens of the world” ([1848] 1967:23). In such a context, Homer can become downright revolutionary.

The work I wish to examine here is one of Feuerbach’s least read, but least read for reasons that make it of particular interest to the philologically inclined. He worked assiduously on *Theogonie nach den Quellen des klassischen, hebräischen und christlichen Altertums* (1857) for several years in order to complete his historical claims on the basis of a mass of evidence from early religious texts. It is just this mass of evidence, cited in the original Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, that makes the work unreadable to most people today (though the editors of the Berlin edition have striven to make it more user-friendly). Like Vico, he had to set about the arduous process of explicating and amassing his new historical literacy, and this text is the best example of that

² Marx mordantly comments on the philosophical shift that occurs in the 1840s, Feuerbach’s heyday, in *The German Ideology*: “Certainly it is an interesting event we are dealing with: the putrescence of the absolute spirit” ([1845-1846] 1978:147).

operation in full swing. And Homer figures quite prominently from the start in the work, providing in the very opening lines of the *Iliad* a kind of primal scene of wish-fulfillment that discloses the essence of the religious mentality.

Feuerbach's opening move is to highlight the seeming contradiction between Achilles' anger and Zeus' will in the first five lines, where the theme on the one hand is Achilles' anger and its consequences, while on the other we are told outright that through these consequences Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή (I.5), "Zeus' will was being accomplished." From the start, then, there appears to be a contradiction between the theological view that these events were fated to happen by a god's decision and the anthropological one that they occur due to Achilles' own desire. The contradiction is only apparent, Feuerbach contends. Zeus acts upon the urgent pleading of Achilles' mother Thetis, and she intervenes only after being called upon by her son. The link between human desire and divine fulfillment is the prayer, he argues, which is the formal expression of a human wish directly to a god (even when entreaties are in fact made by the gods, as in Thetis' case). After belaboring this point with examples from Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, he comes in chapter 6 to what he terms the "original phenomenon of religion" (*das Urphänomen der Religion*):

Der Wunsch ist die Uerscheinung der Götter. Wo Wünsche entstehen, erscheinen, ja, entstehen die Götter. Selbst in der Ilias, die doch dem historischen oder vielmehr für uns vorgeschichtlichen Ursprung der Götter so ferne bereits stand, die schon eine reiche Götter- und Mythenwelt vor sich hatte, ist doch von dem Wahrheitsinstinkt des Dichters das Urphänomen der Religion dadurch ausgesprochen oder erraten, daß gleich die erste eigentliche Theophanie in derselben, der zürnende Gott Apollo, nur die sinnliche Erscheinung and Verwirklichung eines ausdrücklichen Wunsches, des priesterlichen Rachewunsches, ist [...].

The wish is the original appearance of the gods. Wherever wishes originate, there the gods appear—indeed, there they originate. Even in the *Iliad*—which was already so far from the historical (or rather, for us pre-historical) origins of the gods, and which already had a rich world of gods and myths before it—is nonetheless the original phenomenon of religion pronounced or guessed by the poet's instinct for truth, [namely in] that the first real theophany in the work, [that of] the angry god Apollo, is merely the sensuous appearance and realization of an expressed wish, of the priest's wish for revenge.

Feuerbach focuses on those moments when the gods appear directly in connection to a mortal's mental state or open appeal, as in the first theophany in the *Odyssey*, when Telemachus is brooding over his father and Athena suddenly appears (i.113-118). Such moments show the real origin of religion in the projection of human emotions and desires; all other theophanies that are unmotivated by human necessities are merely

poetic constructs ([1857] 1969: 33). Thus Athena’s appearance to Achilles alone as he is about to draw his sword on Agamemnon (I.189-195) merely embodies his own understanding. Though the hero hesitates over what he is about to do, the point is that “Whoever hesitates in this way is already lord and master of his anger. On that account Athena only tells Achilles what his own understanding, his own sense of honor, indeed, his own advantage dictate” ([1857] 1969: 35).

In the same chapter, Feuerbach hastens to establish another principle concerning these Homeric gods: they have a material nature. With the exception of Athena, born from the head, Feuerbach says that the gods of the *Iliad* (and the rest of the world) are engendered from “other organs,” though—he irreverently adds—“not without a head” ([1857] 1969: 35). With mock regret he states, “It is a most lamentable, but unfortunately undeniable fact that the gods owe their being as much as men do only to the truth of ‘sensualism’ and ‘materialism’” ([1857] 1969: 35). The river Okeanos is said to be the origin of the gods; they drink, they eat, they have a flowing, bloodlike substance known as *ikhôr*. Blood is a special material principle in the poem (and Feuerbach, true to his own materialism, is quick to elaborate this point), and only from blood come life and consciousness. Odysseus’ mother only recognizes him upon drinking blood (xi.153). And where there is no blood, this is no flesh, no solid bodily condition, no life, no mental power, no will, no cohesion of consciousness—in sum, no resilient being that can be distinguished from a dream image, a shadow, or a puff of smoke ([1857] 1969: 36).

Kurz, Homer ist “Materialist.” Homer weiß nichts von einem Leibe unterschiedenen und unabhängigen Geiste; er weiß nur von einem Geiste im Leibe, nur von einem Verstande, einem Gemüt, einem Willen in oder mit Körperorganen—noos meta phresin (XVIII.419), noos en stêthessi (xx.366), thumos eni stêthessin (IV.152), en phresi thumos (VIII.202)—, nur von einem Hören mit Ohren (e.g. XV.129, XII.442), nur von einem Sehen mit Augen (I.587, XXI.54 und sonst oft)—, nichts also von den Kunststückchen der modernen Somnambulisten und Spiritualisten, welche zum Beweise der gänzlichen Verschiedenheit und Unabhängigkeit des Geistes vom Körper ihre Gefühle und Gedanken mit derselben Virtuosität und Geläufigkeit durch den After als durch die Kopforgane ausdrücken. Gleichwohl ist Homer Dichter—unübertrefflicher, unvergleichlicher Dichter. Und so hat denn das ebenso große Kunst- als Naturgenie des griechischen Volks schon vor fast 3000 Jahren zur tiefsten Beschämung der amenêna karêna, auf deutsch: Schwachköpfe der (gegenwärtigen) Geister- oder Schattenwelt, das Problem, wie mit dem Materialismus der Natur der Idealismus der Kunst sich vereinigt, wenigstens dichterisch, tatsächlich gelöst. ([1857] 1969: 36-37).

In short, Homer is a “materialist.” Homer knows nothing about a spirit that is distinct and independent of a body; he knows only about a spirit in the body, only about an

understanding, a mind, a will in or with bodily organs—*noos meta phresin* (XVIII.419), *noos en stêthessi* (xx.366), *thumos eni stêthessin* (IV.152), *en phresi thumos* (VIII.202)—, only about hearing with ears (e.g. XV.129, XII.442), only about seeing with eyes (I.587, XXI.54 and quite often)—; he knows nothing, then, about the clever little tricks of the modern somnambulists and spiritualists, who in proof of the complete separation and independence of the spirit from the body express their feelings and thoughts with the same virtuosity and fluency through their posteriors as through their upper organs [*Kopforgane*]. At the same time Homer is a poet—an unsurpassable, incomparable poet. And thus did the equally great artistic and natural genius of the Greek people definitively solve—at least poetically—the problem of how the idealism of art can unite with the materialism of nature nearly 3000 years ago, to the deepest shame of the *amenêna karêna* (in German, the blockheads) of the (present) spirit- or shadow-world. ([1857] 1969: 36-37).

Homer is thus conscripted into Feuerbach's muscular polemic as being completely compatible with the revolutionary, materialist ethos. The primary epiphany of his gods stands like a glaring truth in the eyes of the blind modern idealists, who insist that divinity is one of those sublime "objects of reason," the fruit of rational speculation quite separate from sensuous experience. In reality, divinity is essentially just an object of desire, of wishing. It is something represented, thought, or believed only in that it is something desired, yearned for, wished for. "Just as light is only an object of desire for the eye because it is an essence corresponding to the essence of the eye, so is divinity only an object of desire overall because the nature of the gods corresponds to the nature of human wishes" ([1857] 1969: 40-41).

The gods, however, are quite obviously superior in many ways to the humans who conjure them up through wish-fulfillment. In that sense, they are not the mirror projection of humankind, but something else. The fundamental presupposition of a belief in god is the unconscious wish [*der unbewußte Wunsch*] to be a god. And fundamentally a god is a being who can accomplish whatever he wills. The rift in human beings that creates the need for god is simply that while their ability to accomplish [*Können*] is limited, their ability to wish and imagine is not. If we could do all that we wished, we would have no need to believe in god.

Gott ist daher ursprünglich nichts anderes als der von seinem Gegensatz befreite Nicht-Mensch im Menschen, kein anderes Wesen, nur die andere Hälfte, die dem Menschen fehlt, nur die Ergänzung seines mangelhaften Wesens, seines im Widerspruch mit seinen Wünschen so beschränkten Tatvermögens. Die Gottheit ist keine "apriorische," unabhängige, voraussetzungslose Wesenheit oder Vorstellung [...]. Die Götter sind vollkommene Wesen; aber ihre Vollkommenheit entspringt nur aus der schmerzlichen Unvollkommenheit des Menschen, ist darum keine

unempfindliche, keine phlegmatische wie der Metaphysik; sie sind nur vollkommen, weil sie die Wünsche der Menschen vollenden, vollstrecken [...]. ([1857] 1969:55).

God is therefore originally nothing other than the not-man in man freed from its opposite; not another being, but only the other half that is lacking in man, only the complement to his imperfect being, to his power to accomplish, which is so limited in contrast with his wishes. Divinity is no a priori, independent, unhypothesized essence or idea [...]. The gods are perfect beings; but their perfection stems only from the painful imperfection of man, and is on that account no unfeeling or phlegmatic perfection as in metaphysics; they are only perfect because they complete and carry out human wishes [...]. ([1857] 1969:55).

And it is in such robust perfection that we see once again Feuerbach's revolutionary humanism, for he sees the human ability to posit such perfection as part of the forward drive of the cultural process in history. He states that "man owes his culture to the gods; certainly, but these gods are not the gods of superstition; these gods are the impatient, revolutionary wishes of men to realize their will with the same ease and immediacy as the gods; these gods are therefore the wishes of men to be gods themselves" ([1857] 1969:54). And the problem is that we are now at a time in history when we no longer need the crutch of the divine to move forward. At this point, staying mired in religion is the same as wanting to remain a child in adulthood, since "in religion man is a child" ([1848] 1967:209).

Thus Feuerbach's fascination with Homer is a fascination with the childhood of humankind properly lived in its time and place; the problem with subsequent religion is quite simply that it is way past its expiration date. Although religion is the first form of culture, religion and culture have become incompatible. In fact, now culture must take the place of religion, since, as Goethe says, who has science has no need of religion ([1848] 1967:213-214). In this regard, there is an insurmountable difference between modernity and antiquity, in spite of the huge advances in culture in the time of the Greeks and Romans. "In many of their religious usages and conceptions, the Greeks and Romans did not differ from the most barbarous, uncultured peoples. Thus it is perfectly possible for a man to be cultivated and intelligent in a certain sphere and yet, in matters of religion, to be subject to the most absurd superstition" ([1848] 1967:214). So while Homeric religion is a useful ally for helping to disclose the true essence of religion over all, it remains alienated from the values of the "new man" of the future in that it is an outmoded childhood memory. There is no element of recurrence in Feuerbach's revolutionary agenda, nothing like the *ricorso* in Vico that would imply the age of heroes will return, nothing like the regression and recapitulation in Freud to imply that it never really left us.

Though Feuerbach obviously espouses a political optimism that effectively nullifies the past, he also lays bare the rift in the human character that makes projections so very dangerous. In this regard (and not just in the technical focus on wish-fulfillment), it is interesting to note how he is quite clearly a precursor to Freud. “The ultimate secret of religion is the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious, the voluntary and the involuntary in one and the same individual. Man wills, but often he does so unwillingly—how often he envies the beings who have no will; he is conscious, yet he achieves consciousness unconsciously—how often he deprives himself of consciousness, and how gladly he relapses into unconsciousness at the end of his day’s work!” ([1848] 1967:310-311). The human ego or consciousness, he continues, “stands at the brink of a bottomless abyss; that abyss is his own unconscious being, which seems alien to him” ([1848] 1967:311). In this regard, it is fascinating to see how Feuerbach fixes an old interpretive problem in the *Iliad* that had plagued the theological apologists; namely, the dream sent by Zeus to Agamemnon in book II (lines 5-34), which falsely leads the king to believe he will be victorious in battle. Plato had used this very incident as an example of the kind of falsehood said of the gods that must be purged from poetry in the Kallipolis (*Republic* 383a7-8). Macrobius offers the suggestion (echoed also by Synesius and Proclus) that Agamemnon foolishly overlooked Achilles in leading out the “whole army” and therefore was justly punished for failing to grasp the god’s true meaning (*Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.7.4-6). Such pious reasoning quite ignores the fact that Zeus is openly contemplating how he can honor Achilles by destroying many of the Achaeans (I.1-4). Feuerbach, having established the principle of self-deception in religious thought, can clearly explain this in a much more satisfactory way:

Welch ein Betrug! Aber ist denn dieser Traum wirklich eine Erfindung des Zeus? Hat nicht Agamemnon selbst schon vorher bei Bewußtsein diesen Traum geträumt, diese hochmütige Einbildung von sich gehabt, daß er den Achilleus entbehren könne, daß er auch ohne ihn genug Macht und Hülfsmittel besitze, sich Ehre, d. h. Sieg, zu verschaffen? “Aber dies hat ja Agamemnon nur im Zorne gesagt.” Wohl; aber sogut er die auch nur im Zorne ausgesprochene Drohung, die Briseis dem Achilleus wegzunehmen, nachher wirklich ausgeführt hat, sogut mußte er auch diesen von seinem Königsdünkel eingegebenen Traum dem Achilleus zum Trotz verwirklichen. So ist denn auch dieses theologische Phantasma eine tief begründete anthropologische Erscheinung. Zeus täuscht nur den, der sich selbst getäuscht. ([1857] 1969:198).

What a deception! But then is this dream really an invention of Zeus? Hasn’t Agamemnon himself already dreamed this dream before while conscious, hasn’t he had this arrogant fantasy of himself as being able to do without Achilles, as having enough power and resources even without him to gain honor, that is, victory? “But Agamemnon only said this in anger.” True; but just as he later brought about in

reality his threat, spoken only in anger, to take Briseis away from Achilles, so too did he have to bring into reality—in defiance of Achilles—this dream that was occasioned by his kingly arrogance. Thus this theological phantasm is also a deeply grounded anthropological phenomenon. Zeus deceives only the man who deceives himself. ([1857] 1969:198)

In such ways, Feuerbach plays the modern scholiast to Homer's text, attempting to explicate the logic of ideas that stands behind the poetic inventions and intuitions. Though the subtleties of Christian theology are everywhere abused by him, he shows a boundless energy for proving his points by showing the inherent correctness of Homer's "natural" expressions of psychological motives. In this particular instance (as in the other all-too-human moments of the gods' misbehavior), Homer can do no wrong by presenting us with a theological scandal, because theology itself is a scandal, the greatest self-deception the human species has ever practiced on itself. While one can have nostalgia for the childhood of the human race—a yearning so often expressed in German Romantic literature, as in Schiller's cry in "*Die Götter Griechenlands*": *Schöne Welt, wo bist du? Kehre wieder, / Holdes Blütenalter der Natur!*—the point is that the theogonic power of the human wish has evaporated, conjured away by the blazing torch of reason. And with it go the gods of Greece—*Und uns blieb nur das entseelte Wort.*

III. Freud's *Odyssey* of the Unconscious.

I do not know if I have already told you that Rank has brilliantly solved the problem of Homer. I want him to make it his thesis for admission to the faculty. —Freud to Karl Abraham (Dec. 21, 1914)

The relationship between Freud and Feuerbach is quite close, as we have already seen. In fact, Feuerbach was the youthful Freud's favorite philosopher, and in his polemic with religion (especially in *The Future of an Illusion* [1927]), we can still see the strident secular agenda so familiar to Feuerbach's age, as well as the thoroughgoing assumption that religion is the product of wish-fulfillment. In fact, Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), the seminal work of psychoanalysis proper (though it builds on the clinical insights already announced in *Studies on Hysteria* [1893-1895]), is one giant study in wish-fulfillment, focused on the principal mechanism still left to the civilized person for circumventing the many limitations placed on the realization of desire: dreams. Though first published in 1900, this text would go through several editions in Freud's lifetime, each new version showing the brave new world that Freud's science of the mind was opening up with grand hopes of making many areas of human life intelligible for the first time. These areas included not just dreaming and common psychopathologies, but also religion, art, history, and nothing short of the most basic logic of human culture. Though originally Freud had denied any interest in creating a dictionary of dream symbols, later editions would encode just that, a catalogue of

universal dream symbols that recalls Vico's grand project of a universal lexicon of ideas. In a process similar to Vico's recovery of the "primary operation" of the human mind, Freud recovers the unconscious and its laws of operation, the "primary process" thinking that stands behind dreaming.

From the start, however, we see that the world of epic is oddly configured into the text, to the extent that we might even term it an epic palimpsest. Freud openly suggests that the unconscious workings of the mind are like the underworld by using a Virgilian line as the motto of his title page: *Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta mouebo* (*Aeneid* 7.312). He returns to this line at the end of this considerably long work in order to drive home the notion that the human mind comprises two psychological systems, the "primary and secondary processes," which means that the irrational and the rational coexist in everyone in a kind of dynamic tension. Whereas Feuerbach saw wish-fulfillment as actualizing the complementary "not-man" in man, Freud intensifies the phenomenon of wishing by making the most corrosive instances of it unconscious, repressed, and therefore mischievous from within. Freud's dynamic model of consciousness is like an inefficient police state, which actively practices censorship over undesirable thoughts, yet can hardly eradicate real dissent. What is more, the process of repression preserves whatever it represses, such that psychoanalysis radically calls into question the pastness of the past. Hence when he returns to the Virgilian motto, it is to stress that in all of us our remote past remains quite active in our dreams, since "what is suppressed continues to exist in normal people as well as abnormal, and remains capable of psychic functioning" (1900:608; original emphasis). Freud's *katabasis* into the operations of the primary process reveals how much the past bubbles up into our present in uncanny ways.

The theoretical burden Freud faces is how to link the previous understanding of wish-fulfillment (as in Feuerbach) with his more dynamically unconscious version. How is it, in sum, that a dream seems quite clearly in some ways to be based on material from the present (the so-called "day residues"), yet draws deeply from within our earlier lives and desires? Are not old wishes simply dead wishes, devoid of any interest or effect? Initially he merely states that dream wishes may include those from the past "which have been abandoned, overlaid and repressed, and to which we have to attribute some sort of continued existence only because of their reemergence in a dream. They are not dead in our sense of the word but only like the shades in the *Odyssey*, which awoke to some sort of life as soon as they had tasted blood" (1900:249). Initially, then, Freud's argument seems to tell us that a few underworld denizens will pop up from time to time. Later, however, he makes a much stronger case for the uncanny dominance of the psychic underworld in the dream life. Towards the end of the work, Freud is strongly arguing that "a conscious wish can only become a dream-instigator if it succeeds in awakening an unconscious wish with the same tenor and in obtaining reinforcement from it" (1900:553; original emphasis). In one of his pet analogies, the conscious wish is merely the

entrepreneur, while the unconscious one is “the capitalist who provides the psychological outlay for the dream” (1900:561). But it turns out the great fund of the dream life comprises specifically childhood wishes, which rock the conscious world from the Tartarus of their exile: “These wishes in our unconscious, ever on the alert and, so to say, immortal, remind one of the legendary Titans, weighed down since primeval ages by the massive bulk of the mountains which were once hurled upon them by the victorious gods and which are still shaken from time to time by the convulsion of their limbs” (1900:553). Thus Freud’s *katabasis* down into the unconscious mind is more than an antiquary expedition; it is a return to a former center of power, one that has not given up its claims on us. So strongly did he identify with the underworld site of his new science that he did not wish to return to the surface. Speaking of his dissenting pupils and colleagues years later, he said, “I can only express a wish that fortune may grant an agreeable upward journey to all those who have found their stay in the underworld of psychoanalysis too uncomfortable for their taste. The rest of us, I hope, will be permitted without hindrance to carry through to their conclusion our labors in the depths” (1914:66).

A central example of the survival of an infantile wish in *The Interpretation of Dreams* also draws from a reading of the *Odyssey*. In a section on typical dreams, Freud notes the frequent phenomenon of dreaming one is naked, which is tied to the wish to return to the childhood sense of physical freedom and lack of bodily inhibitions. “When we look back at this unashamed period of childhood it seems to us a Paradise; and Paradise itself is no more than a group phantasy of the childhood of the individual” (1900:245)—here we see the Feuerbachian twist still at work in Freud. But dreams of being naked are typically anxiety dreams, since the second psychical system intervenes against the childhood wish to be naked by causing the dream to turn negative, even punitive. This is a typical Freudian “compromise formation”—“The unconscious purpose requires the exhibiting to proceed; the censorship demands that it shall be stopped” (1900:246). This common dream, then, is at the heart of the story of Odysseus and Nausicaä, where he appears before her naked and in dire conditions (vi.127-197). Freud introduces his discussion with a quotation from Gottfried Keller, who notes how an unhappy traveler will often dream of coming home only to have the dream turn sour and fill the dreamer with dread and shame. Keller insists “This, so long as men breathe, is the dream of the unhappy wanderer; and Homer has evoked the picture of his plight from the deepest and eternal nature of man” (1900:247). But not so, Freud continues glossing Keller’s text; the reality behind this tale is rather the childhood wish, and Keller has not traced the source of “the deepest and eternal nature of man” back far enough.

Das tiefste und ewige Wesen der Menschheit, auf dessen Erweckung der Dichter in der Regel bei seinen Hörern baut, das sind jene Regungen des Seelenlebens, die in der später prähistorisch gewordenen Kinderzeit wurzeln. Hinter den

bewußtseinsfähigen und einwandfreien Wünschen des Heimatlosen brechen im Traum die unterdrückten und unerlaubt gewordenen Kinderwünsche hervor, und darum schlägt der Traum, den die Sage von der Nausikaa objektiviert, regelmäßig in einen Angsttraum um. ([1900] 1991:254)

The deepest and eternal nature of man, upon whose evocation in his hearers the poet is accustomed to rely, lies in those impulses of the mind which have their roots in childhood that has since become prehistoric. Suppressed and forbidden wishes from childhood break through in the dream behind the exile's unobjectionable wishes which are capable of entering consciousness; and that is why the dream which finds concrete expression in the legend of Nausicaä ends as a rule as an anxiety dream (1900:247).

The dynamic of repression, then, preserves and even empowers childhood wishes, while at the same time banishing them. Hence the awesome power of these early wishes in the dream life, and, in a manner Freud would work out further in subsequent years, in the daydreaming and fantasizing that become art.

But this leads us to the question: what about children's dreams? So much of the tension that creates this underworld of desire is tied to the process of civilization, of being raised to deny in a sense one's own true nature. For Freud, the dreams of children are quite close to Feuerbach's uncomplicated Homeric world.

Die Träume der kleinen Kinder sind häufig simple Wunscherfüllungen und dann im Gegensatz zu den Träumen Erwachsener gar nicht interessant. Sie geben keine Rätsel zu lösen, sind aber natürlich unschätzbar für den Erwie, daß der Traum seinem innersten Wesen nach eine Wunscherfüllung bedeutet. ([1900] 1991:141)

The dreams of young children are frequently pure wishfulments and are in that case quite uninteresting compared with the dreams of adults. They raise no problems for solution; but on the other hand they are of inestimable importance in proving that, in their essential nature, dreams represent fulfilments of wishes. (1900: 127)

Childhood dreams are thus paradigm instances of the *Urphänomen* of dreaming, but they do not serve well to demonstrate the baroque operations of censorship that inform the adult dream work. Like Homer's gods, they are self-evident scandals. This Freud demonstrates by relating a series of dreams culled from his own children, one of which shows us something of where the Homeric world stood in the fantasy life of Viennese children of the era: "My eldest boy, then eight years old, already had dreams of his phantasies coming true: he dreamt that he was driving in a chariot with Achilles and that Diomedes was the charioteer. As may be guessed, he had been excited the day before by a book on the legends of Greece which had been given to his elder sister" (1900:129). We should note, then, that the very fact the Homeric texts were such an important part of a

middle-class childhood (both in retold form and later in the originals studied at the Gymnasium) underscored their association with the “childhood of the human race.” Humanistic education in the nineteenth century seemingly recapitulated the development of Western civilization in a sense.

Of course, we all know that Freud’s preferred mythical paradigm was Oedipus, not the Homeric epics. But even here we see an epic consciousness of father-son rivalry already announced before he introduces his famous reading of *Oedipus the King* in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The reading appears in the same chapter on typical dreams as the discussion of Nausicaä and Odysseus, in a section dealing with hostile feelings toward loved ones. A universal tension in all sectors of society, he observes, is found in relations between fathers and sons. “The obscure information which is brought to us by mythology and legend from the primeval ages of human society, gives an unpleasing picture of the father’s despotic power and of the ruthlessness with which he made use of it. Kronos devoured his children, just as the wild boar devours the sow’s litter; while Zeus emasculated his father [sic] and made himself ruler in his place” (1900:256). The reference to Hesiodic myth, in spite of the error, endows this filial-paternal tension with a cosmic significance, and indeed, the theme of castration would become vital to the unfolding Freudian narrative of masculine development (and crippling to its theory of femininity). In fact, so great is the repression of these dire cosmic truths that Freud later argued in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* the very mention of the myth disturbed his unconscious and caused him to make his “Freudian” slip of moving the conflict up a generation. As we all know, it was Kronos who castrated Ouranos, not Zeus who castrated Kronos. But *The Interpretation of Dreams* was written during the time of Freud’s self-analysis, when he dealt with difficult repressed thoughts concerning his father, and this interfered with his attempts to discuss things objectively in the book. “What I wanted to suppress often succeeded against my will in gaining access to what I had chosen to relate, and appeared in it in the form of an error that I failed to notice” (1901:219). Thus Freud instantiated his own truth by this very error.

The fear of castration by the father, the one who like Zeus now occupies the seat of power, is one of the founding anxieties that make civilization possible according to psychoanalysis, yet it remains a traumatic unconscious idea. But at this stage (i.e., around 1900), Freud is rather seeing the myth in terms of the son’s desire to supplant the father. The link to epic poetry through the filial hero would get stronger after Freud developed a “scientific myth” of his own in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), which put forward the hypothesis that human culture began in reaction to a filial revolt in the primal horde of prehistoric times when the primal father was killed and eaten by the sons. In a manner that combines Vico’s historical mythopoeia with Feuerbach’s wish-fulfillment, Freud characterizes the first heroic poet as a person caught between retelling in “poetic characters” the true history of the past and expressing a wish for what never really was.

In the postscript to *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud states out of his longing for the lost father, some individual in the past decided to “free himself from the group and take over the father’s part,” which he does through using his imagination (1921:136). He invents the heroic myth, which is the narrative of how the hero alone slays the primal father, who appears in myth as a totemic monster (this highly condensed discussion by Freud can be hard to follow, but he simply assumes the primitive form of heroic myth involves an isolated monster-slaying human). To the extent that the murder of the father is true, the historical nucleus of the myth is repressed and expressed only in the symbolic form of the monster tale; this brings us close to the historical realities Vico sought to disclose with his new science. But the element of wish-fulfillment that the proto-poet injects is the hero’s isolation, and of course his subsequent succession to the father’s position—something which could not have happened historically, according to Freud, since the primal brother band could only rise up in concord with one another (hence the civilizing results of this act of slaughter). It is through the heroic myth, then, that the individual emerges from group psychology, though this individualist proto-poet finds his way back to the group by being their bard. In that he sees himself as the hero the poet remains an individual, but the group also identifies with the hero through their same longing for the primal father. The hero is thus absorbed as the “ego ideal” (what we might call more weakly a role model) by the group, and this solidifies their group identity, increasing their own narcissistic stake in the heroic tale. This is how the heroic individual becomes later deified, perhaps paving the way for the father to return as the father god instead of appearing as a totemic monster (1921:137). So while Freud’s narrative mode remains strongly conditioned by drama and tragedy, his view of the relationship between individual and group psychology is in fact modeled on the emergence of the national epic. This explains perhaps the curious bipolarity of his social theory, which rests on the foci of an *Übermensch* and a *Masse* (by 1933, however, such a view would make perfect sense).

Such a tale of heroic individualism would seem to cast epic and its mythology as great advances in civilization. In that epic is a form of art this is largely true. Art is a means of expressing-without-expressing unconscious wishes, and as such gives us consolation from the pressures of civilization and affords us important sources of pleasure. But for Freud as for Feuerbach, religion is past its expiration date. The only modern corollary of the mythopoeic process is the psychical products of neurotics and psychotics, whose personal mythologies bear comparison with the collective ones from the ancient past. Freud makes this assertion, in fact, in the 1912 postscript to his study of a case of paranoia, one of his relatively few attempts to treat a psychosis from the psychoanalytic point of view (1911:82). Thus the burning relevance of ancient mythology to us moderns is not in the *huponoia* or philosophical undersense that lurks behind the poetic arras, but in the mechanism of projective paranoia that reveals the

elementary operations of the human mind. Given the phylogenetic assumptions of Freud's day (actually only of Freud, as they were already becoming outmoded in 1912), the similarity of mental disorders to primitive ways of thinking greatly empowers psychoanalysis to become a new science of humanity, capable of reading for the first time and in the light of *Wissenschaft* the psychical realities that lie behind the most ancient rituals and texts. But that new legibility of the past is achieved through a historical "scientific myth" no less projective and paranoid—we must remember the *Urvatertragödie* Freud posits in *Totem and Taboo* arose during the time of the first great dissensions in the movement, when his rebellious sons Alfred Adler, Wilhelm Stekel, and Carl Jung had turned on him. Thereafter the myth of the primal horde would dominate Freud's social and historical thinking to the end of his life, appearing alive and well in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), his historical epic of the Jewish people. It is not far off the mark, then, to call Freud's new science his "paranoid quest" (Farrell 1996).

Freud was effectively too busy to follow up on these cultural insights with the industry shown by Vico and Feuerbach for their own, but the *bottega* Freud existed for the very purpose of extending the new science into the humanities. I want to end this discussion by mentioning a little known fact about the psychoanalytic movement. Before they parted ways in the 1920s, Freud was very close to someone who came to be like an adopted son to him, a man named Otto Rank. The movement took pity on Rank as a very young man and encouraged him to get a proper Gymnasium education and go on to study at the University of Vienna. His Ph. D. dissertation on the Lohengrin legend was the first academic thesis to be written using a psychoanalytic methodology, and he was especially active in founding and editing the movement's journal for applied psychoanalysis, *Imago*. Rank and Freud worked so well together—the former deftly and dutifully picking up and applying the ideas of the latter—that one must be cautious about sorting out just whose ideas are whose during these years. Shortly after Freud had completed *Totem and Taboo*, Rank began work on a project that Freud encouraged him to make into a *Habilitationschrift*, which would then qualify him for teaching at the university. This project was to solve the Homeric question by means of psychoanalytic tools. The idea itself delighted Freud, as he related to his colleague Sándor Ferenczi: "Rank has delightfully solved the problem of Homer with the aid of a psychoanalytic presupposition. We were very amused by it" (Falzeder and Brabant 1996:37). The reason for Freud's delight is not hard to fathom: by using Freud's new science to solve the classic academic conundrum, Rank was not only legitimating psychoanalysis within the university, he was also showing the superiority of psychoanalysis as a historical method. For the classically educated Freud, this would be an unimaginable instance of wish-fulfillment.

Rank was rather well versed in the long academic controversy surrounding Homer, and concluded on the basis of contemporary scholarship that "Homer" was in fact

an individual, a poet from Ionia who consciously wrote poetry like any other classical poet, and that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were “book epics,” produced by means of writing as unified works on the basis of earlier poetry (1917:167). In that regard, psychoanalysis has nothing to add to the state of the question. Rather, it is with the psychoanalytic insight into the dynamics of fantasy formation that Rank seeks to make a new contribution to understanding the psychogenesis of the national epic. Freud’s work on daydreaming asserts that one fantasizes about a different future based upon childhood wishes (true to his belief that true happiness can only come from the fulfillment of a childhood wish [1908]). Thus dissatisfaction with the present leads one to imagine a new future, but one that is unconsciously informed by the wishes from one’s past. Rank adapts this to assert that the great national epics arise as products of memory-elaboration (*Erinnerungsbildung*), a process that is essentially “a fantasizing that is applied backwards, whose result is projected into the past and which in fact replaces another, real past” (1917:376). In this curious way, then, man makes the future into the past through the elaboration of memory, displacing those things most hoped for into a previous time, which, under the influence of the powerful mystique the “prehistoric” period of childhood affords, looms very large in the mind. For this reason epics can only successfully be written about dark ages, which have grand associations but disclose few facts and details to derail one’s fantasy. It is therefore in the curious multi-temporality of human fantasy—which imagines a future as much as it re-imagines the past—that one should locate the ruptures, discordances, anachronisms, and inconsistencies of the epic texts, not in any complicated scheme of multiple authorship or historical diffusion. The Homeric texts are therefore an accurate picture of an individual’s poetic fantasizing, one whose very fissures disclose the psychological truth of their origins.

So why have you never heard of this study? World War I broke out and Rank was mobilized into the Austrian army, which interrupted the project, though he did manage to publish its essentials in *Imago* (in two parts in the fifth volume). As he was reflecting upon his situation in Istanbul, Rank came to realize the sudden relevance of Homeric epic in the newly brutalized world that surrounded him, and his own immersion in the Homeric question became the equivalent of the epic poet’s escape from the dreadful present (1917:135-137). This vignette, while interesting enough to mention in a context like this one, reveals a larger psychoanalytic perspective that came in the wake of the war’s outbreak; namely, that the real possibility of regression to primitive and barbaric depths is always with us, because the past is never really past. Given Freud’s deep convictions about the phylogenetic dimensions of memory (i.e., that we have racial or species memories and not just personal ones), this regression can take the form of an eruptive, archaic force in history that gives the lie to modern pretensions of having overcome the past. Modernity can only know itself by daring to take the *katabasis* down to its archaic heritage and by confronting the traumas of the past. While the work of any

new science is a consolation, a badly needed *pou stô*, it is no guarantee that we are truly moving forward.

IV. Conclusion: Homeric Childhoods

I have deliberately focused on three authors here that are not in the mainstream of classical scholarship, in order to stress the wider implications of the Homerizon for European culture. This was, after all, one of the purposes of this joint endeavor. But it would be very wrong to assume that such reverberations in the fields of philosophy and psychoanalysis are peripheral to the “real work” of Homeric studies on the home turf of classical philology. Indeed, we could easily complete this study by adding to the fray Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729-1812), one of the illustrious progenitors of *Altertumswissenschaft* in the eighteenth century. Under the influence of David Hume’s writings on natural religion, Heyne too deployed systematically the metaphor of childhood reasoning to the study of mythology, a study he programmatically propounded in detailed philological and historical terms. In his *Inquiry into the Causes of Fables or the Physics of Ancient Myths*, Heyne endeavored twenty years after the publication of the last edition of the *Scienza Nuova* to define just how “physical or natural causes shaped myth and its various transformations” ([1764] 1972:218). Here again we see the assumption that “in its childhood [*in infantia generis humani*], mankind had not yet become skilled in using its own mental powers or in reasoning or observing subtly,” and that “we must consider the ignorance of things and causes to be the foundation for all mythology” ([1764] 1972:219—*Rerum itaque caussarumque ignoratio omni mythologiae fundum substruere putanda est*). Since this childhood understanding is profoundly sense-based, while ours is rife with abstractions, “we must abandon any hasty conceptualizing, if we wish to understand the concepts and judgments of primitive men. A mind that is capable of grasping only simple things through the senses cannot rise to metaphysical conceptions. But this must mean too, that each of our judgments must remain vague and unclear when we set out to learn in a strict way what early man thought about God and divine nature” ([1764] 1972:219). Departing from the assumed incommensurability of ancient and modern thought-worlds, Heyne sets a historical and philological agenda—including a comparative ethnography—that we are professionally more familiar and more comfortable with than the special pleadings of Vico, Feuerbach, or Freud.³

³ Heyne’s views on Homer in relation to the world of earlier myth he poetically shapes is spelled out very clearly in his *Excursus in Homerum*, specifically in the excursus *De interventu deorum in Homero* (1822:1-5), *De mythis Homericis* (1822:68-72), and perhaps most thoroughly in *De Allegoria Homerica* (1822:224-237). In essence, he sees

Heyne's professional agenda may make us more comfortable, but there is that terrible persistence of the childhood metaphor again, one that will prove to be no mere fad or illustrative analogy, even within the profession of classical studies. In 1872, we find Nietzsche, reeling under the controversy stirred up by the *Birth of Tragedy*, complaining to Erwin Rohde:

If only people would stop this soft talk of the Homeric world as a youthful one, the springtime of the Greeks, and so on. In the sense in which it is maintained, the idea is false. That a tremendous, wild conflict, emerging from dark crudity and cruelty, precedes the Homeric era, that Homer stands as victor at the end of this long comfortless period—this is one of my most certain convictions. The Greeks are much older than people think. One can speak of spring as long as one has a winter to precede it, but this world of purity and beauty did not drop from the sky. (1969:97; July 16, 1872)

Nietzsche had every right to be annoyed at the over-deployment of the childhood metaphor—and yet, it would continue to have a long career even after the writing of this letter in 1872, once the powerful idea of phylogenetic recapitulation became fashionable in post-Darwinian Europe and the United States. This metaphor has been one of the strands linking this paper together, and so I want now to work this further into my construal of the Homerizon, especially in reference to these particular projects of modernity and what they entail.

The three authors discussed here deploy Homer as a primal text, an alpha point that remains of vital interest to those who wish to know something essential about primitive humanity from an omega standpoint. The operant metaphor of childhood has powerfully informed their sense that while deeply human, the Homeric world remains at an insurmountable variance with the present one. Yet “Homer” is not identical to childhood, but rather represents its textual residue; the poems are an archive of childhood experiences and idioms, as it were. All three authors assume that a degree of distance already exists between the genesis of the Homeric poems and some zero point of human development on the horizon. Thus while for the literate tradition of western culture “Homer” is the alpha point, “Homer” is also assumed to be the omega point for all previous pre-literate tradition(s) archived in the texts. The archival process—the process by which the poems come to be according to conventions, prejudices, and the mental and poetic limitations of the times—renders the text in some need of decoding. Yet there is still the hope that we can, through a new science of some kind, gain access to primal truths that are naively present in or through the text's shimmering veil.

Homer as a poet who reshapes inherited myth of a more primitive time into a poetic creation that has its own internal procedures.

The new science's claims to offer us an expanded consciousness or greater ground of truth rest firmly on its "work on myth," to use Hans Blumenberg's term. And this is a reminder, as Blumenberg suggests, that "the historical power of myth is not founded on the origins of its contents, [...] but rather in the fact that, in its procedure and in its 'form,' it is *no longer* something else"; hence it is important "to describe myth itself as already the manifestation of an overcoming, of the gaining of a distance, of a moderation of bitter earnestness" ([1979] 1985:16; original emphasis). But the new science sees something more than spent wisdom in the myth, since "theory sees in myth an ensemble of answers to questions, such as it is itself, or wants to be. That forces it, while rejecting the answers, to acknowledge the questions" ([1979] 1985:27). What the construal of the Homeric world as a "childhood" presupposes is the paradoxical, simultaneous assertion of its lingering relevance and yet unquestioned obsolescence, an assertion that promotes the Homeric texts to the unique position of containing equally strong elements of identity and alterity—just as memories of childhood do. Modernity assumes the position of the adult who in essence knows the whole story, who now can unmask the garbled truth of childhood *muthos* from the plenary position of grown up *logos*. This would seem to be the very essence of articulating a historical consciousness.

Yet we are living, of course, in an age when such gestures of unmasking—so definitive for various currents of modernity and modernism—are now suspect, decried as mythological enterprises of their own. The modern "work on myth" has been exposed as an inherent feature of the mythic structure of modernity itself, a kind of "myth of last recourse," to borrow Blumenberg's phrase. Myth is invoked or invented by modern rationality as a means of creating the space for some new identity and direction for an ongoing human project. We no longer safely assume the self-evident passage from *muthos* to *logos*; neither the Greek evidence (as Claude Calame argues [(1996) 2003]) nor modern experience (as Blumenberg contends) can underwrite such a notion. We are thus cast adrift from our good old modern moorings and stand in need of new ways of exploring the equation of myth with childhood—i.e., new ways of understanding this fascination with a foundational experience that remains somehow enigmatic and undecoded, though quite present as a narrative surface beyond which lurks some element of depth or darkness.

What the three authors examined here share is a tectonic shift in the terms "childhood," "nature," and "imagination," one that greatly affects the Homerizon from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth. We might even term this shift the "empowerment of childhood." Plato had certainly empowered childhood in a sense by linking the influence of myth so powerfully to this stage of development that his Socrates had to censor the revered Homeric content lest it corrupt the youth of the Kallipolis. What produces the initial negativity of the Homeric religious horizon, after all, is the impression it makes on the young mind, which is easily influenced and incapable of

sorting out allegorical truths (*Republic* 378d7-e3). But this concern is with the childish mind as reproducer, not producer of myths; the youthful understanding is approached as a *tabula rasa* which our imperiled rationality must save from evil influence. Towards the very end of antiquity, the emperor Julian in his genealogy of myth expressed the opinion that myths were indeed invented for children originally (*tais tôn paidiôn psuchais*), and continue to serve a vital purpose for children and those of a childlike mentality (*Oration* 7.206d; 226d). Yet he still assumed that they were invented by people who knew better, i.e. they were forged by poets who hinted at truths in myth they knew better in some other way. The essentially human enterprise of rationality lies elsewhere, and with it goes the properly shaped trajectory of human desire. Myth remains somehow supplemental, overcome, or second-best, suitable for children yet insufficient to fully rational adults.

But what we are dealing with in this period from the eighteenth through the early twentieth century is a far greater and abiding power of childhood with respect to humanness as a whole, one captured in Wordsworth's *Prelude*:

Dumb yearnings, hidden appetites, are ours,
And *they must* have their food. Our childhood sits,
Our simple childhood, sits upon a throne
That hath more power than all the elements.

(1850 version: V.505-509; original emphasis)

What is validated through invoking childhood desire in this way? In part, precisely those elements of imagination or fantasy that stand at variance with the limited agenda of rational hegemony and that are now re-authorized through reconciliation with Nature. We see this, for example, in Vico's association of Homer with the violence and turbulence of the natural sublime. The violence of the heroic imagination is a direct consequence of its corporeal barbarity and relative proximity to bestial nature, yet this same violence is responsible for the sublimity—and superiority—of heroic poetry to any subsequent creations from the age of reason. But Vico does not side with textual effects over truth content. Though he contends that Homer's texts contain corrupt and distorted histories from the most remote ages, Vico does not go to the Platonic extreme of dismissing the texts as mere falsifications aimed more at "aesthetic" pleasure than at what really is/was the case. Instead, Vico articulates a characteristic compromise position, saving a kind of truth for the Homeric texts that approaches a childhood epistemology.

The poetic characters are "imaginative universals," categorical personages through whom the particulars of human truth are subsumed by the people at large (809).

Because “Homer”—that is, the Greek people—had hit upon the central imaginative universals in these characters, it was obvious in antiquity (at least to Horace) that later authors must draw their characters from the Homeric texts, since the stock of such compelling and universal characters is limited (806). Since poetic characters are the essence of poetry for Vico, poetic wisdom, then, consists of a set inventory of humanly relevant and humanly constructed “imaginative universals,” what we might term the Forms of Humanity. This is entirely in accordance with the *verum-factum* principle mentioned above, and can be seen as a humanistic response to the Platonic tradition. The uniformity and consistency of poetic characters derive from their being created by an entire nation, and the very childlike crudeness of that nation makes the characters sublime through the operations of a powerful collective imagination. There are thus “two eternal properties of poetry” we must draw from this scenario. “One that poetic sublimity is inseparable from popularity”—which represents a great transvaluation of the Platonic scenario whereby the great popularity of Homeric poetry is proof of the waywardness of its influence and its distance from true knowing, a condition the Guardians must remedy with their arcane knowledge and censorship—“and the other that peoples who have first created heroic characters for themselves will afterward apprehend human customs only in terms of characters made famous by luminous examples” (809). Again, the manner in which these characters illuminate the understanding gives them a distinct epistemological function akin to the Platonic Forms. But this epistemology is a home-grown human affair quite different from the perfect knowledge of God:

In such fashion the first men of the gentile nations, children of nascent mankind, created things according to their own ideas. But this creation was infinitely different from that of God. For God, in his purest intelligence, knows things, and, by knowing them, creates them; but they, in their robust ignorance, did it by virtue of a wholly corporeal imagination. And because it was quite corporeal, they did it with marvelous sublimity; a sublimity such and so great that it excessively perturbed the very persons who by imagining did the creating, for which they were called “poets,” which is Greek for “creators.” (376)

We might wonder how Vico remains optimistic about this self-made knowledge that is grounded in childish projection (as we would call it) and “robust ignorance.” But then we must recall that image from the frontispiece, which shows the light of Divine Providence bouncing off the figure of metaphysics and hitting Homer in the back. Humanity gropes its way toward a more perfect rationality and a fuller knowing because that is the ordained direction of history, a direction that is quite present in spite of the stumbling nature of human development (and its problematic circularity through *ricorso*). Hence this basic metaphysical optimism underwrites and empowers the imaginative and creative aspect of human activity, just as our own optimism for our children’s futures leads us to praise all their crude and self-referential creative efforts. The comparison is

entirely Vico's, who claims the ancients "gave the things they wondered at substantial being after their own ideas, just as children do, whom we see take inanimate things in their hands and play with them and talk to them as though they were living persons" (375). Great poetry, for all its disturbing imagery and even scandal, clearly has a civilizing mission in spite of its origins in self-referential ignorance and fear.

Now this is the three-fold labor of great poetry: (1) to invent sublime fables suited to the popular understanding, (2) to perturb to excess, with a view to the end proposed: (3) to teach the vulgar to act virtuously, as the poets taught themselves [...]. Of this nature of human institutions it remained an eternal property, expressed in a noble phrase of Tacitus, that frightened men vainly "no sooner imagine than they believe" (*fingunt simul creduntque*). (376)

Poetic wisdom is thus a truly human wisdom; for all its faults, it speaks to the mind as it really is (or was) and fundamentally improves it (*pace* Plato!). In this way, Vico, though he seems eager to vindicate Divine Providence, constantly shores up the secular claims of human agency and underscores the internal validity of the historical process. This is precisely what makes him such a compelling figure of transition (or compromise?) between the dogmatically theological and the rabidly secular worldviews. What is at stake here in relation to Homer is just what human knowledge represents in the context of the threshing floor of history.

And here we need to stress how much the grand historical projects of modernity, which seek to create a total picture of humanity, work in consort with philosophical or psychological projects of restoring a fuller picture of human subjectivity. The metaphor of childhood, I would argue, is precisely the point of mediation between those two great fronts. To incorporate childhood into a view of the adult is effectively to inscribe the *persistence* of history within the fully human (assuming as I do somewhat teleologically that an adult lives a fully human life, while a child is still in training). On both fronts there is also a certain displacement of rationality in favor of a totalizing view of humanity that better accommodates the negativity of the Homeric horizon, since now we think of humanity not just in terms of its norm-fulfilling accomplishments and noetic aspirations (those good "adult" aspects of ourselves), but also in terms of its inalienable desires (those at times "regressive" or "infantile" wishes we cannot get rid of, like our need for plunder and slave girls). I suppose we might formulate this shift away from the Platonic approach by saying humanness is now defined by the historical archaeology of its desire, instead of being defined solely by the prospective truthfulness or rightness of the objects of its desire (be they the Forms or God or whatever). Vico clearly thinks his imaginative universals are right for men, but is not concerned with the question of whether they are right for God. But they are right for men only in the space of history (seen as both event and memory)—the truly human space where human desire shapes the world.

Indeed, along with childhood, nature, and imagination, human desire is another one of the great tectonic plates that shift in this arrangement, as we see so very vividly in the cases of Feuerbach and Freud, who enshrine the wish as the great cosmogonic agent of fantasy. The role Homeric religion plays in this is informative. For Feuerbach, the greatness of human misery lies behind the contours of the theogonic wish, in a way that seems rather romantically to empower the human emotions in glorious hyperbole.

Why did the Greeks lay such a stress upon the immortality and happiness of the gods? Because they themselves did not wish to be mortal and unhappy. Where no lamentations about man's mortality and misery are heard, no hymns are heard in honor of the immortal and happy gods. Only the water of tears shed within the human heart evaporates in the sky of imagination into the cloudy image of the divine being. From the universal stream, Okeanos, Homer derives the gods; but this stream abounding with gods is in reality only an efflux of human feelings. ([1873] 2004:33)

This transvaluation of the emotions follows quite strictly along the principles of his new philosophy, which teaches, "In feelings—indeed, in the feelings of daily occurrence—the deepest and highest truths are concealed" (*Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, 33; [1843] 1986:53). It is a philosophy that also puts sensuousness (*Sinnlichkeit*) and material reality to the fore as criteria of truth, against the abstractions of idealism. Small wonder, then, that the overtly material nature of the Greek gods attracts Feuerbach. Though figments of the imagination (something which in German thought was considered very positive, at least since Karl Moritz's *Götterlehre*), the Greek gods represent at least a well grounded set of truly human wishes. The stark contrast between pagan Greek and Christian wishes in this regard is the substance of his peroration in *The Essence of Religion*.

The Greeks had limited gods—that means: they had limited wishes. The Greeks did not wish to live forever, they only wished not to grow old and die, and they did not absolutely wish not to die, they only wished not to die now [...] only not in the bloom of their age, only not of a violent, painful death; they did not wish to be saved in heaven, only happy, only to live without trouble and pain; they did not sigh as the Christians do, because they were subject to the necessity of Nature, to the wants of sexual instinct, of sleep, of eating and drinking; they still submitted in their wishes to the limits of human nature; they were not yet creators from nothing, they did not yet make wine from water, they only purified and distilled the water of Nature and changed it in an organic way into the blood of the gods; they drew the contents of divine and blissful life not from mere imagination, but from the materials of the real world; they built the heaven of the gods upon the ground of this earth. The Greeks did not make the divine, i.e. the possible being, the original and end of the real one,

but they made the real being the measure of the possible one. ([1873] 2004:69-70; original emphasis)

Thus the basic, childish crudeness of the Greek religious imagination is what redeems Greek civilization from the perils and aridities of transcendent monotheism, which runs from the sensuous in full denial of its own humanity. Modernity must remember the Greeks in order to get back in touch with itself and with the real.

Only now, in the modern era, has mankind arrived again—as once in Greece after the demise of the Oriental dream world—at the sensuous, that is, the unfalsified and objective perception of the sensuous, that is, of the real; precisely with this, however, it also came to itself; for a man who devotes himself only to entities of the imagination or of abstract thought is himself only an abstract or fantastic, but not a real and true human being. The reality of man depends only on the reality of his object. If you have nothing, you are nothing. ([1843] 1986:60)

While it is true here that human desire is again being qualified as to its object, note that the thrust of Feuerbach's philosophy suggests that human desire simply must take itself as its own object, in the light of the historical and material reality of its own needs. That is precisely the lesson of Homer's gods, in all their human crudity and cruelty. Swimming quite consciously against the Platonic current, Feuerbach forges the Kallipolis of his "philosophy of the future" by following the *tupoi* of the poet, who stands nearer to the truth than the philosopher, since the truth as far as people are concerned is the living *Mensch* himself.⁴

Freud, however, teaches us that bad things happen when humanity takes itself as its own object—indeed, much mischief is wrought by humanity's incestuous wishes and narcissistic defenses. Though a true Feuerbachian in spirit, Freud rather interestingly makes all of religion a family affair, and at a stroke he thus erases the distinctions so prevalently policed in the nineteenth century between polytheism and Judeo-Christian monotheism. All of religion can be reduced to the antinomies generated by the desire for the mother—the original oedipal sin—and the longing for the murdered primal father, the flashpoint of Freud's Big Bang theory of culture. At the same time, he underscores the necessary nature of the self-deceptions that Feuerbach so excoriates, making any philosophy of the future open to serious questioning due to the mounting pressure of

⁴ In a letter written to Wilhelm Bolin in July 1867, Feuerbach confesses, "Der Poet steht mir überhaupt näher der Wahrheit, wenn die Wahrheit zuletzt doch nur, für den Menschen wenigstens, der lebendige Mensch selbst ist, als der Philosoph. Darum habe ich auch in meiner 'Theogonie' aufs engste und innigste mich an Homer angeschlossen, ob ich gleich fern davon bin, im Griechen den vollen, wahren, ganzen Menschen zu finden" (2004:308).

repression in the civilizing process. The essential difference between Feuerbach's humanistic optimism and Freud's therapeutic vision lies in the tragic emplotment of desire in Freud's monomyth of patricide, a plot that stresses the essential antinomies of human civilization and human desire as shaped by natural impulse. It was precisely in his ambition to find tragedy in the past that Freud came to read myths very differently from the nineteenth century with its Promethean self-conceptions. Freud's prehistory is a scandalous prehistory, for scandal produces the energy of repression, and without repression there is no unconscious, no motor force for culture—and no ground for psychoanalysis. There is at the heart of his historical literacy an inherently gothic *anagnorisis*, a truth-that-must-be-denied, all built up from the paradigm of childhood/prehistoric trauma. History in Freud is, after all, a tale that covers a wound. And it is this wounded, yet empowered childhood that sits upon the throne in the post-Freudian universe.

It is worth considering for an instant how very different the post-Freudian perspective is from that of optimistic Victorians like Max Müller, for whom the fragments of childhood relate a very different kind of story. The dream of Müller's philology was to find in human language the thread of continuity that links us to the ancestral past—a past he constructs enthusiastically out of Homer and the Vedas. Like an eager biographer, the scholar grasps any small fragment of his hero's—i.e. humanity's—childhood.

In whatever language it may be written, every line, every word, is welcome, that bears the impress of the early days of mankind. In our museums we collect the rude playthings of our hero's boyhood, and we try to guess from their colossal features the thoughts of the mind which they once reflected. Many things are still unintelligible to us, and the hieroglyphic language of antiquity records but half of the mind's unconscious intentions. Yet more and more the image of man, in whatever clime we meet him, rises before us, noble and pure from the very beginning: even his errors we learn to understand—even his dreams we begin to interpret. As far as we can trace back the footsteps of man, even on the lowest strata of history, we see that the divine gift of a sound and sober intellect belonged to him from the very first; and the idea of a humanity emerging slowly from the depths of an animal brutality can never be maintained again. The earliest work of art wrought by the human mind—more ancient than any literary document, and prior even to the first whisperings of tradition—the human language, forms an uninterrupted chain from the first dawn of history down to our own times. We still speak the language of the first ancestors of our race; and this language, with its wonderful structure, bears witness against such unhallowed imputations. ([1909] 1977:9-10; original emphasis)

While accepting many of these preconceptions, Freud's new science comes to a very different conclusion about the unconscious intentions extracted from the ancestral tongue, and openly delights in the "unhallowed imputations" it makes at humanity's expense. The brutalities it uncovers are not just phylogenetic, i.e. dating from the remote antiquity of the species, but ontogenetic as well, impinging on each and every childhood to this day. Childhood thus becomes the crossroads of both inherited and self-generated traumas.

The tragic truth that each citizen of the Freudian commonwealth must grasp is that family strife and incest, the things banished from the Kallipolis, are the stuff of our most basic humanity, are encoded in our ancestral tongue and persist in our nightly dreams. This was the truth Freud sought to use to take the citadel of Western rationalism by storm, making good on his promise to "raise up Acheron" (*Acheronta mouebo*). And it seems fitting that his new science would oscillate between two genres in its master tropes of *katabasis* and *anagnorisis*—it is certainly telling that two of Freud's strongest identifications were with Heinrich Schliemann, the discoverer of "Trojan realities," and Oedipus, who solves the riddle of mankind and finally of himself. This oscillation between genres is fitting because this particular new science locates a tragic struggle of epic dimensions, and as a consequence it tends to identify itself with the very mythic discourse it seeks to decode. Behind the scenes, we glimpse this in Freud's letters, and I leave you with this last anecdote. As he marshalled his troops in 1908, Freud cautioned his crown prince Carl Jung from squabbling with his faithful follower Karl Abraham. "We mustn't quarrel when we are besieging Troy," he wrote. "Do you remember the lines from the *Philoctetes* [line 113]? aiJrei' ta; tovxa tau'ta th;n Troivan movna" (this bow alone will take Troy)? My self-confidence has so increased that I am thinking of taking this line as a motto for a new edition of the *Collected Papers on the Theory of the Neuroses*"—which in fact he did (McGuire 1974:146). With these words of Odysseus, we see that at this far end of the Homerizon, the siege of Troy had become nothing less than the quest for possessing all the treasured childhood secrets of humanity itself.

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