

VICO ON THE END OF ART

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Abstract

The work of the 18th century Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico includes a major focus on the role of Homeric epic in interpreting societies where law has not fully developed as a public institution applying to all citizens. Vico advances the view that poetry, whether as Homeric epic or in a more general sense, has less importance in societies where rationality and law ground institutions and condition public language. In the transition from 'heroic' to 'human' stages of history, both violence and imagination are subordinated to universal justice and the use of reason. Vico presents a version of the 'death of art' thesis to be found in later philosophers including Hegel, Nietzsche, Adorno and Danto. This paper will clarify all these points in putting forward an argument about what the 'death of art' means in different thinkers and what Vico has to contribute to understanding the place of the aesthetic in social philosophy. Vico both suggests an early version of the death of art thesis, while also showing that the decline of art leads to social disintegration.

Vico's Influence

Quotations

Samuel Beckett

'Dante...Bruno. Vico...Joyce' (in *Our Exagmination Round His Factification For Incamination of **Work in Progress***, commentaries on the first published parts of *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce)

Such is a painful exposition of Vico's dynamic treatment of Language, Poetry and Myth. He may still appear as a mystic to some: if so, a mystic that rejects the transcendental in every shape and form as a factor in human development.- and whose Providence is not divine enough to do without the cooperation of humanity

(Beckett, Brion et al 1939, 9)

Max Horkheimer

'Vico and Mythology' in 'Beginnings of the Bourgeois philosophy of History'.

Giambattista Vico is the first real philosopher of history in the modern age [...] a sociologist and psychologist of the first order. In addition to this, he revitalized the enterprise of philology, established the philosophy of art, and possessed an eye for important cultural processes unlike almost anyone in his own age or afterward.

(Horkheimer 1993, 375-376)

Hannah Arendt

'The Modern Concept of History'

[A]lthough it seems that man is unable to recognize the given world which he has not made himself, he nevertheless must be capable of knowing at least what he has made himself. This pragmatic attitude is already the fully articulated reason why Vico turned his attention to history and thus became one of the fathers of modern historical consciousness.

(Arendt 1958, 584)

Erich Auerbach

'Vico and Aesthetic Historicism'

Vico had achieved by this theory the predominance of the historical sciences, based on the certitude that men can understand men, that all possible forms of human life and thinking, as created and experienced by men, must be found in the potentialities of the human mind; that therefore we are capable of re-evoking human history from the depth of our own consciousness.

(Auerbach 1948, 113)

Hans-Georg Gadamer

Truth and Method

Vico's return to the Roman concept of the *sensus communis*, and his defense of humanist rhetoric against modern science, is of special interest to us, for here we are introduced to an element of truth in the human sciences that was no longer recognizable when they conceptualized themselves in the nineteenth century. Vico lived in an unbroken tradition of rhetorical and humanist culture, and only had to reassert anew its ageless claim. Ultimately, it has always been known that the possibilities of rational proof and instruction do not fully exhaust the sphere of knowledge. Hence Vico's appeal to the *sensus communis* belongs, as we have seen, in a wider context that goes back to antiquity and whose continued effect into the present day is our theme.

(Gadamer 2004, 22)

'Vico asserted the epistemological primacy of the man-made historical world'

(Gadamer 2004, 225)

Jacques Derrida

Of Grammatology

'This play of supplement [in Rousseau], the always open possibility of a catastrophic regression and the annulment of progress, recalls not only Vico's *ricorsi*.'

(Derrida 1997, 298)

Michel Foucault

Discipline and Punish

'As Vico remarked, this old jurisprudence was "an entire poetics".'

(Foucault 1977, 45)

Quotations from Vico

La scienza nuova/The New Science (NS) third edition (1744) paragraph numbers followed by page references in the 1975 English edition, translated by Bergin and Fisch.

New Science, 'Idea of the Work'

[T]he heroic fables were true stories of the heroes and their heroic customs, which are found to have flourished in the barbarous period of all nations; so that the two poems of Homer are found to be two great treasure houses of discoveries of the natural law of the gentes among the still barbarous Greeks. In the present work this period of barbarism is determined to have lasted among the Greeks until the time of Herodotus, called the father of Greek history, whose books are for the most part full of fables and whose style retains very much of the Homeric. But Thucydides, the first scrupulous and serious historian of Greece, at the beginning of his account, declares that down to his father's time (and thus to that of Herodotus, who was an old man when Thucydides was a child) the Greeks were quite ignorant of their own antiquities [...].

(NS §7/Vico 1975, 7)

New Science, 'Idea of the Work'

[The three ages] (1) The age of the gods, in which the gentiles believed they lived under divine governments, and everything was commanded them by auspices and oracles, which are the oldest institutions in profane history. (2) The age of the heroes in which they reigned everywhere in aristocratic commonwealths, on account of a certain superiority of nature which they held themselves to have over the plebs. (3) The age of men, in which all men recognised themselves as equal in human nature, and therefore there were established first the popular commonwealths and then the monarchies, both of which are forms of human government.

In harmony with these three kinds of nature and government, three kinds of language were spoken which compose the vocabulary of this Science: (1) That of the time of the families when gentile men were newly received into humanity. This, we shall find, was a mute language of signs and physical objects having natural relations to the ideas they wished to express. (2) That spoken by means of heroic emblems, or similitudes, comparisons, images, metaphors, and natural descriptions, which make up the great body of the heroic language which was spoken at the time the heroes reigned. (3) Human language using words agreed upon by the people, a language of which they are absolute lords, and which is proper to the popular commonwealth and monarchical states; a

language whereby the people may fix the meaning of the laws by which the nobles as well as plebs are bound.

(NS §§31-32/Vico 1975, 20)

New Science, Book I Establishment of Principles

Philosophy contemplate reason, whence comes knowledge of the true; philology observes that of which human choice is author, whence comes consciousness of the certain.

(NS §138/Vico 1975, 63)

New Science, Book II Poetic Wisdom

Such counsels, then, dictated by natural reason as useful to free civil life, must have been sentiments cherished by plebs of the heroic cities. Aesop was made a poetic character of these plebs in this respect. Later, fables having to do with moral philosophy were ascribed to him, and he was turned into the first moral philosopher, just as Solon, who by his laws made Athens a free commonwealth, was turned into a sage. And because Aesop counselled in fables, he was supposed to have lived before Solon, who counselled in maxims. These fables must have been conceived originally in heroic verse. There is a later tradition that they were conceived in imabic verse, which the Greek peoples spoke in a transitional period between heroic verse and prose. They were finally written in prose and have reached us in that form.

(NS §426/Vico 1975, 137)

New Science, Book IV The Course the Nations Run, Three kinds of natural law

The first law was divine, for men believed themselves and all their institutions to depend on the gods, since they thought everything was a god or made or done by a god.

The second was heroic law, the law of force, but controlled by religion, which alone can keep force within bounds where there are no human laws or none strong enough to curb it. Hence providence ordained it that the first peoples, ferocious by nature, should be persuaded by this their religion to acquiesce naturally in force, and that, being as yet incapable of reason, they should measure right by fortune, with a view to which they took counsel by auspicial divination. The law of force is the law of Achilles, who referred every right to the tip of his spear.

The third is the human law dictated by fully developed human reason.

(NS §§922-924/Vico 1975, 338)

Other Quotations on the Death of Art

Hegel on art and truth in *Aesthetics*, Introduction

For us art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself. In general it was early in history that thought passed judgement against art as a mode of illustrating the ideas of the Divine; this happens with the Jews and Mohamedans, for example, and indeed even with the Greeks, for Plato opposed the gods of Homer and Hesiod starkly enough. (Hegel 1975, 103)

Hegel on after art

[T]he *after* of art consists in the fact that there dwells in the spirit the need to satisfy solely in its own inner self as the true form for truth to take. Art in its beginnings still leaves over something mysterious, a secret foreboding and a longing, because its creations have not completely set forth their full content for imaginative vision. But if the perfect content has been perfectly revealed in artistic shapes, the the more far-seeing spirit rejects this objective manifestation and turns back into its inner self. This is the case in our own time. (Hegel 1975, 103)

Nietzsche on the death of tragedy, *Birth of Tragedy* 15

The Platonic dialogue was, as it were, the barge on which the shipwrecked ancient poetry saved herself with all her children; crowded into a narrow space and timidly submitting to the single pilot, Socrates, they now sailed into a new world, which never tired of looking at the fantastic spectacle of this procession. Indeed, Plato has given to all posterity the model of a new art form, the model of the *novel*—which may be described as an infinitely enhanced Aesopian fable, in which poetry holds the same rank in relation to dialectical philosophy as the same philosophy held for many centuries in relation to theology: namely the rank of *ancilla*. This was the new position into which Plato, under the pressure of the demonic Socrates, forced poetry. (Nietzsche 2000, 90-91)

Nietzsche on the end of art, *Human, All Too Human*, 223

Evening twilight of art.—Just as in old age one remembers one's youth and celebrates festivals of remembrance, so will mankind soon stand in relation to art. It will be a moving recollection of the joys of youth. Perhaps art has never before been comprehended so profoundly or with so much feeling as it is now, when the magic of death seems to play around it. Recall that Greek city in south Italy which one *one* day of the year continued to celebrate their Greek festival and did so with tears and sadness at the fact that foreign barbarism was triumphing more and more over the customs they had brought with them;

it is to be doubted whether the Hellenic has ever been so greatly savoured, or its golden nectar imbibed with so much relish, as it was among these declining Hellenes. The artist will soon be regarded as a glorious relic, and we shall bestow upon him, as a marvellous stranger upon whose strength and beauty the happiness of former ages depended, honours such as we do not grant to others or our own kind. The best in us has perhaps been inherited from the sensibility of earlier ages to which we hardly any longer have access by direct paths; the sun has already set, but the sky of our life still glows with its light, even though we no longer see it. (Nietzsche 1996, 106)

Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Aesthetics and the Work of Art

It is not that aesthetics is irrelevant to art, but that the relationship between the artwork and its material counterpart must be gotten right for aesthetics to have an bearing, and though there may be an innate aesthetic sense, the cognitive apparatus required for it to come into play cannot itself be considered innate. (Danto 1981, 107)

Danto, 'The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense'

'We live at a moment when it is clear that art can be made of anything, and where there is no mark through which works of art can be perceptually different from the most ordinary of objects.' (Danto 1998, 139)

Adorno, 'Reading Balzac'

The Balzacian novel feeds on the tensions between the passions of human beings and a state of the world that is already moving in the direction of not tolerating passion, which it considers a disruption of its activities. (Adorno 1991, 127)

Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Situation

Those who have been duped by the culture industry and are eager for its commodities were never familiar with art. They are therefore able to perceive art's inadequacy to the present life process of society—though not society's own untruth—more unobstructedly than do those who do still remember what an artwork once was. They push for the deaestheticization of art.

(Adorno 1997, 16)

Vico

Giambattista Vico developed a philosophy of the human world which stands at the base of Enlightenment thought, philosophy of history, philosophy of the social sciences, philosophy of literature and art in strangely underrated ways. Not only did he anticipate thought in these fields, he had a major influence on literary creativity in the way he was taken up by James Joyce in *Ulysses*, a landmark in the history of the novel and in twentieth century culture, and even more so in *Finnegans Wake*. His thoughts on the historical basis of Homer influenced F.A. Wolf's work on the composition of the Homeric epics and therefore all modern thought about Homer. Many other lines of influence can be found, including: Jules Michelet in historiography, Erich Auerbach in literary studies, Georges Sorel in political thought, Hans-Georg Gadamer in hermeneutic philosophy, Edward Said in literary and colonial studies. Significant references can be found in Arendt, Foucault and Derrida. He anticipates much of what can be found in later Enlightenment thinkers, Idealist and Romantic Philosophy, Nietzsche and even more recent thinkers (Berlin 2000).

Direct attention to Vico's own writing, particularly his masterpiece the *New Science*, is small compared with the widely present legacy of his thought, even if in diffuse and often unacknowledged forms. This paper looks at just one area in which he anticipated a well known area of debate, that is the death of art thesis, also known as the after art and the end of art theses. The discussion necessarily encompasses Vico's general philosophy of literature and history, since it cannot be explained at all without reference to the centrality of art followed by its disappearance from the centre of the social world. The death of art thesis is well known as a theme in Hegel and Adorno, to which we can add Nietzsche's thoughts about the limits of art and Arthur Danto's institutional theory of art. Articulation of these positions enables Vico's contribution to aesthetic theory to be clarified, as part of the role of poetics in his philosophy of the world of human institution.

The basic structure of Vico's thought is that history has three stages (which could be counted as four) and that the progress of history through these stages is repeated in a cycle of history. The history he refers to, as regards antiquity, which is the most important part, is the history of the gentes. He means the non-Jewish nations, in a word related to the word 'gentile' for non-Jew. The history of the ancient Jews has to be distinguished from the history of other nations because the ancient Jewish history, as far as Vico is concerned, is the same as Biblical history, that is the history of a people guided by God in contrast to the other nations who do not have such a relationship with God and his

revelations. Christianity changes the situation, since then the God of the Hebrew Bible becomes the God of Christianity. Vico appears to have been writing from the position of a loyal mainstream Catholic of his time, though some commentators have expressed doubts about how sincere this was given his dependence on church patronage and the presence of the Inquisition in Naples at that time. He largely separates out issues of Biblical history by concentrating on the the history of the nations, which very largely means Greece and Rome.

The three stages are the divine world which emerges from a state of nature in which the original humans (strictly speaking the first humans after the great flood in *Genesis*) are giants wondering in a solitary way round forests until thunder and lightning frightens them. James Joyce picked up on this in *Finnegans Wake*, where there are periodic 100 letter thunder words. The thunderstorms provoke an immediate vocal reaction to this frightening power. This is a sound like 'Jove' as in the Roman word for the king of the gods and jus, as in the Latin word for rights and justice. Something like this word appears in all languages with the same function and origin. Vico here appears to be creating an interpretative myth rather than a scientific explanation. This puts him in the same company as the great early modern contract theorists, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Vico indicates knowledge of Hobbes, but appears to have been unaware of Locke. Rousseau follows Vico and there is no evidence of direct connection between their thought despite striking similarities, particularly with regard to Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. Rousseau, like Montesquieu and Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury were in Italy at the right time to have been influenced by Vico. There is no evidence that they read him, but a tantalising possibility does linger that they did take inspiration from Vico. Vico was in a similar position to the contract theorists in the ambiguous relation between history of origins and creation of an origin myth suitable for their overall project. Since Vico comments on the importance of myth in the first two stages of history, by his own argument it could be said that he brings divine and heroic poetics into philosophy, though he claims his philosophy is a science. The issue of interpolating current concerns into origin stories is something Vico applies himself when he discusses natural law in Hugo Grotius, John Selden and Hobbes, suggesting that these thinkers saw natural law before it existed in very early human society. He sees myth in legal and political theorists, but may substitute new myth rather than pure reason.

The fear of the giants after the thunderstorms drives them to seek security and shelter away from the forests, which leads them first to clear forests for the purpose of

agriculture and then found cities. His understanding of the origin of cities is partly determined by the medieval origins of Venice as a city of Italian refugees from the Lombards, though largely he relies on ancient history, poetry and myth. The cities are places of safety from the harsh living conditions after the great flood and the violence between giants. The origin of agriculture is commemorated in myths of Hercules (Herakles) clearing forest and killing lions, which Vico regards as universal in form. The founding of cities has a model myth for Vico in the foundation of Thebes by Cadmus and the emergence of the Thebans from the dragon's teeth planted in the ground. The dragon is another standard myth for Vico, of early political power claiming supernatural force, which he relates to the role of the dragon in Chinese culture, in a rare excursion from the European context. The city is founded by fierce patriarchs ruling by terror and claiming to be gods. Vico refers to ancient Greek and Roman histories, though with very little citation, to suggest how those deprived of legal rights in the early cities acquire greater status. Over time, public law and status equality gradually permeate societies as the use of force and resort to myth declines.

The first consequence of this historical progression is the age of heroes when the rulers of cities claim to be descended from gods rather than claiming to be gods. Law and religion are in the hands of warrior aristocrats and their priests, but have more public meaning and application than in the divine age. Poetry has divine age origins, which Vico links with the legendary poet, Orpheus, but the poetry we have comes from the heroic age from the theological poets, Hesiod and Homer. That is poets who deal with a world where there are gods and gods intervening in human affairs. It is Homer who is of prime interest and the Homeric epics are a dominant presence in the *New Science*. The heroic age itself gives way to the human world in which the plebeians of the cities attain equal status in law and religion with the aristocracy. The first version of the human world is the democratic city republic as in Athens and Rome. However, democracy undermines itself through conflicting factions and the final stage of history is in human monarchies, where the monarch is above the aristocracy and applies laws equally to all. Myth and poetry decline in importance as law and rational philosophy take over. There is a growth of commerce displacing barbaric warrior society. The humane application of universal law in an equal manner to all citizens replaces force but then lacks the force to maintain itself, leading to a collapse and a return to the beginning of history. The second cycle of history arises from the collapse of the Roman Empire in the west, passing through divine kings as the leaders of German tribes, heroic rules as the medieval knights and the human world emerging in medieval city republics, themselves giving way to early modern monarchies.

Medieval chivalric epics and romances (*Chanson de Roland*, later Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*), along with Dante's *Divine Comedy* are the equivalent to Homer.

Vico thinks of the earliest humans as having limited intelligence but great imagination. This is what allows for the poetry of Hesiod, and more importantly in Vico's analysis, Homer. Poetry, of the Homeric kind, belongs to a heroic age where language does not exist to determine law, the most significant aspect of language in the following human age. Vico's account of the language of the divine age is partly supported by examples of the story of a Scythian king sending objects to a Persian king to warn him away from invasion. The account is also supported by reference to Egyptian hieroglyphs. In both cases, the essential characteristic is that language is the direct manipulation of objects or iconic depiction of objects, establishing a connection between words and nature. The political status of the divine age in Vico, a time that leaves traces, particularly in ancient literary texts and the idea of a golden age, but has close to no historical or material records, is of father-god figures ruling over extended families and their dependents who form a sub-human class not given natural rights.

It lives on in later cultural memory and the most repeated example is the story of the Cyclops in the *Odyssey*, Book IX. The Homeric epics are largely the record of the heroic age, though in the form of fable. The role of fable as a substitute for history lingers on until the time of Herodotus in Vico's account. It is only in the historical work of Thucydides that history emerges freed from fable. This view of the difference between Herodotus and Thucydides is not unique to Vico, but may underestimate the extent to which the *History of the Peloponnesian War* is exemplary tale rather than dispassionate history, with imagination often substituting for recorded facts. In Vico's account Thucydides represents a version of the death of art, along with Plato.

We might take these as very ambiguous examples. Aristotle seems much more demythologised and post-poetic than Plato or Thucydides. The human age is one where art is dead in the sense that poetry and imagination do not have the same structuring role in the way communities remember or describe social institutions to themselves. The human world is a world without, or at least has much less, use of [visual image, emblems, not in Italian], simile, metaphor, pictorial language and direct description of nature. These belong to the language of heroic jurisprudence which is precise in designating what belongs to the warrior aristocracy, but is not suitable for general laws applying to all individuals. The human world is one of literal and universal language.

This is not the language of poetry. Poetry belongs to a world in which heroes command language rather than the whole people. The way of commanding is different in that the heroic language belongs to individuals rather than the community as a whole. Individuality of meaning expresses itself in figurative language and language connected with nature. The idea of a language connected with nature is partly that of a language that does not decode symbols and myths, they appear in natural language. Francis Bacon's *Wisdom of the Ancients* provides a model for the decoding of what heroic language contains. The heroic language is poetic and Vico sometimes suggests that people literally spoke (or sang) in poetry as the normal means of communication. Perhaps this is Vico's way of using rhetoric to make a point with vigour. He was a professor of rhetoric and a systematic approach to using language to persuade would be unsurprising given that background, which can be traced back to Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and the ancient Sophists. There is a tension though with claims that the *New Science* does for the world of human institutions what Descartes did for the natural world. Descartes claimed to be taking a strictly deductive approach appealing to reason and nothing else. There is some ambiguity here, as Descartes himself uses rhetorical and even poetic means to make his argument which rests on a kind of Neo-Stoic ethic of life guided by reason. Vico's own claim to science gives his science priority over that of Descartes, since Vico argues that human institutions are known to the human mind that created them with more certainty than objects of nature which are further from the mind. Here, Vico turns a Cartesian argument about the importance of clear and distinct ideas, that is the ideas most present in the mind, against Descartes. Since the history of human institutions is full of myth and poetry, to an extent in which Vico himself seems to be creating interpretative myths, there may be a complete overturning of Descartes. In the historical science of human institutions, Vico argues for a convergence of philosophy and philology in interpreting ancient poetry. In this way, Vico anticipates Nietzschean philology turned into genealogy along with the convergence of philology, Biblical theology and Aristotelian ethics in Gadamer's account of the origins of hermeneutics. The aspect of Vico which claims to be a science as Descartes is the source of natural science leads more in the direction of social science.

The human world and its language ends in apocalypse as the violence it tries to contain through law and universality breaks down because it does not deploy violence and individual commands. The non-poetic human language itself is destined to collapse into natural, poetic, violent language, so suggesting a second death of art for the kind of Aesopian art that remains.

Vico proposed that the Homeric epics were the key to the understanding of ancient history and the general cycle of human history. Narrowly speaking he sees the Homeric world as belonging to the second of three stages, but the other two stages are part of the account. Vico sees the Homeric heroes as lacking stable character and moral capacity. As he sees the Homeric epics stretched over a time which comprises the three main stages of history (divine, heroic, human), he gives it a very loose structure in terms of historical reference as well as action. At the centre is the aristocratic warrior states of Vico's heroic age, but Homeric epic also show how this age emerged from the divine age of early human settlements under god kings, later evolving into the human age of law governed states. The three stages can be regarded as four, since the human world is divided between democratic republics and human monarchies.

The energy of the Homeric epics is built on imaginative universals, which have a place in the consciousness of the heroic age, lacking in the human age. The human age rests the state on laws of a rational universal kind which go along with the abstract universals developed in Platonic philosophy. The human age is structured around abstract universals that appeal to universal reason rather than the imaginative universals appealing to the senses of the heroic age. The heroic age has authority based on the commands of semi-divine warrior heroes, while authority in the human age rests on the general laws of human courts and legislators. The structure of the human age does not put poetry at the centre because imagination and force are not at the centre. The imaginative universal belongs to a world of force, as the authority of the hero-warriors rests on the strength of force against enemies and inferiors.

Though Homeric epic incorporates some elements of the human world from its emergence over centuries, and Virgil's *Aeneid* does so even more, the relevance of epic poetry diminishes over time as the world of imagination and force recedes into the past. Force keeps receding until the laws of the human state lack force to maintain themselves, leading to a catastrophic return to the pure force of the divine age as the state collapses. The death of the state is preceded by the death of poetry and the lack of poetry marks the beginning of the process of state decline. Force is the more immediate cause of decline, but that is intertwined with the decline of poetic imagination. In both cases, particularity gives way to universality. Universality of legal forms is the movement towards an apocalyptic end of history followed by rebirth. The end of poetry leads to the end of history. The first death of poetry is associated with the rationalism of Socratic Athens which roughly coincides with the Tables of Law in Rome. The relationship between the

two events is fundamental for Vico because they are the dual faces of rationalisation, which has a philosophical aspect and a public justice aspect.

Hegel

This can be placed in relation to versions of the death of art thesis in Hegel, Nietzsche, Adorno and Danto. The Hegel version is that the speculative philosophy he has developed supersedes the capacity of art to represent spirit, so that while art will continue to be produced it cannot have the significance of the time when art (along with religion) was representing the development of spirit in the era concerned. The Nietzsche version is more an occasional hypothesis than a clear theory, but he does on occasion suggest that art has been superseded by science as a creative evolving interpretation of the world and that artists lie, though he often of course appears to advocate a fusion of art and philosophy. The fusionism itself may contain a suspicion of art on its own. The Adorno version is that art is impossible in the horror of a world destroyed by a kind of reason that denies nature and social relations that deny nature. Famously Adorno referred to the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz, but this is not to be taken literally and the same applies to the other 'death of art' arguments. The point for Adorno, is that some kinds of aesthetic beauty are irrelevant in such an era so that art is more of a struggle with a dehumanised world. Danto was very familiar with Hegel (Danto 1998) and Nietzsche (Danto 2005) and we can see their influence in his thought on art as something to be defined institutionally rather than through definition of an essence, particularly given the collapsing boundaries between art and not-art in modernity.

Vico precedes all these versions of the death of art thesis, with his suggestion that once we leave the heroic age, art is a declining force as we live by prose not poetry, abstraction not imaginative universal. Vico refers to Aesop's fables as the kind of literature which emerge as Homeric world recedes and Platonic rationalism becomes the more dominant cultural force. Though Vico is very quiet about the literary developments that follow the Middle Ages, as he believed that history since the fall of the Roman Empire in the west repeated history from earliest antiquity to the Roman fall, it is necessary to see his literary thought as something to be applied to early modern and Enlightenment Europe. This is the time of what we now know as the rise of the novel after the decline of epic. This literary transition accompanies a transition from the second heroic age of medieval knights. Vico's philosophy of history and literature should lead us to expect a further process of loss of the poetic into our own time. The paper will assess the

plausibility of such an expectation, in comparison with the other death of art theories mentioned.

According to Hegel, history has entered a stage in his time in which art can no longer express the rationality that has developed to explain nature and the historical human world. Art has had a role of expressing philosophical and religious truths in earlier ages, but that was only possible in simpler communities where reflection was not so much required in grasping the ethics of the community or the metaphysics of nature. Ancient Greece reached a peak of art as symbolisation of reason in the Athenian tragedies.

The 'death of art' thesis in Hegel is already building up with the suggestion of a declining role for art after a peak in 5th century BCE Athens. Homeric epic and Attic tragedy belong to a classical form of art which gives way to a romantic form of art in Christianity as reality at its purest is now thought to belong in a transcendental world beyond artistic representation. Art becomes more free in its invention and less of an expression of truth in this era, and loses its role as expression of truth after a series of stages, which in outline comprise the transition from Paganism to Christianity, the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism in northern Europe, and the transition from literal Biblical Protestantism to a symbolic understanding of Christianity in the Enlightenment. This goes along with a philosophical transition from metaphysical forms to representations in the mind and then to the Idealist unity of rational mind and rational universe.

Nietzsche

Nietzsche advocates a version of the 'death of art' thesis in *Human, All Too Human*. This follows a version of aesthetic absolutism (aesthetics as total value) in *The Birth of Tragedy* and then in modified form in 'Richard Wagner in Bayreuth'. Later writing exists in the space between the earlier aestheticism and the adventure in scepticism about aestheticism. Aestheticism avoids the kind of philosophy of art as an object found in Hegel by tending towards non-differentiation of the aesthetic. Nietzsche proposes in rather aestheticised prose in the concluding section of 'From the Souls of Writers and Artists', a twilight for art. As with Hegel's death of art, this is more a displacement of art from a privileged philosophical status than a total death. Nietzsche associates art with metaphysical positions he now wishes to exclude. Like Hegel, he suggests something inferior about the status of the novel (which is consistent with *Birth of Tragedy*), though by

Nietzsche's time the novel has achieved a generally higher status as a literary form than it had in Hegel's time. Nietzsche refers to the novel as a disorganised form.

Nietzsche is sometimes seen as offering a version of aesthetic metaphysics and redemption of suffering through art, at least in *The Birth of Tragedy* and maybe again in some of his later texts (Young 1992) while at least one of his 'middle' texts, *Human, All Too Human* has a less inflated view of art (Young 1992, Chapter 3). Like all attempts at a stadial theories of Nietzsche's work this is reductive though not always completely misleading. Nietzsche does advocate a version of the death of art thesis in *The Birth of Tragedy*. This is quite close to Vico in some respects, probably in a purely accidental way. Nietzsche suggests that Platonic philosophy and Aesopian fables mark the end of tragedy, of the preceding Homeric world, in a triumph of abstract reason over art. Art, it should be noted does have physiological roots even in this supposed example of aesthetic metaphysics. Tragedy is said to emerge from a combination of the Dionysian, dance which has origins in physical urges to movement and the Apolline, vision which has roots in dreams. The Dionysian engages with death and sacrifice while the Apolline deals with order and the state. Nietzsche does suggest redemptive value to tragedy in relation to life as suffering. The search for an escape from nihilism following exploration of it is a constant theme in Nietzsche, so is not specific to an early aesthetic phase. In a way that has echoes of Hegel, Nietzsche suggests that truth finds some expression in tragedy, but then that moves from poetry into philosophy. This is presented as a decline to a more limited kind of truth, compared with the experience of Dionysian sacrifice and Apolline vision. The death is not permanent. In a Dionysian spirit, rebirth is possible and Nietzsche finds the spirit of tragedy returned in the operas of Richard Wagner. Given that Nietzsche argues that the relationship of Dionysian and Apolline necessary to the greatest art is temporary, he must believe in a coming death of art as Wagnerian opera becomes inevitably exhausted. It is a cyclical version of the death of art claim, as is Vico's original death of art argument.

Chapter Four 'From the Souls of Writers and Artists' in *Human, All Too Human* offers a more final version of the death of art thesis. That is Nietzsche offers a clear progression from religion and myth to art and then science. At this point Nietzsche might to offer a version of Hegelian philosophy of history in art and Auguste Comte's theory of the stages of society. The idea that literature and art is marked by myth and religion which is absent from science looks like a view rooted in Enlightenment as it develops in Idealist or Romantic philosophies of history or Positivist views of stages of society. Since Nietzsche gives science the leading role at this point then he appears to be close to

Positivism. The death of art itself becomes an aesthetic experience, as Nietzsche closes the chapter with a prose poem on the beauty of artistic culture in its last stages and in memory. This parallels comments on the death of morality in *Daybreak*. *Daybreak* does not, however, propose the end of all moral thinking, and there is something even more ambiguous in Nietzsche's aestheticisation of the death of art in *Human, All too Human*. Science itself is given the quality of creativity which belongs to art in its great period, so that science is to some degree aestheticised. The death of art in the triumph of science is itself a repetition of the loss of ancient Greek culture in a city in southern Italy. The city and historical context are not identified, but presumably this refers to the antique growth of Roman domination in areas of Italy where there were Greek colonies. The death of art is then a repetition of the replacement of a Greek culture rooted in the city and its tradition with the Roman culture of empire, legal formalism and more formal ways of writing literature. Nietzsche is not explicit about this, but it is a familiar theme in Montesquieu, Hegel, and others. There is a version of this in Vico when we consider the ways Homer and Virgil are discussed, so that Virgil is referring to the solidification of the boundaries of the Roman state in his account of Hades in the *Aeneid*, a characteristic lacking in Homer's account of Hades in the *Odyssey*.

Later texts by Nietzsche do not suggest a commitment to the death of art. *The Gay Science* includes poetry. All the later texts have strong literary qualities and three could be said to be more literary than essayistic: *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Ecce Homo*. Stendhal and Dostoevsky appear as great exponents of psychology. Georges Bizet is put forward as a great composer. Essay three of *On the Genealogy of Morality* gives a definition of beauty, derived from Stendhal, as the promise of beauty. Kant's aesthetics is rejected here, as are aspects of Wagner but there is certainly no rejection of art and aesthetics as such. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* refers to the lies of the poets and laughing at tragedies real and imagined. Maybe aestheticism is rejected in these remarks, but only in a highly ambiguous way. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a philosophical work of literature. Laughter is an element of aesthetic reactions and there is no pure truth on offer from anywhere. Any rejection of aestheticism is part of a new aestheticism of aphoristic writing, laughter and pseudo-prophetic fiction.

Across his philosophical career, Nietzsche writes at the boundary between aestheticism and a twilight of the aesthetic. At least in his early writing, he suggests that the tension expresses itself in historical phases in which the highest aestheticism returns after a brief historical movement. The understanding of tragedy as aesthetic redemption for the suffering of life could be said to be anachronistic in relation to the appearance of

Greek tragedy in religious festivals and the lack of aestheticist thought in antiquity. Aestheticism can point beyond itself, which is part of Nietzsche's later argument for an aesthetic twilight. The difference between phases of Nietzsche's thought on art may then be whether we see art as referring to something outside itself at the time of its emergence or giving way to something outside itself over time. The first option is close to Vico's vision of poetry as most important in Homeric epic, as an expression of a heroic world view, including its imagination religion and violence. The second option is close to Vico's vision of a heroic poetic world that gives way to a human world of law and rationality.

Adorno

Adorno famously says that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Adorno 1981, 33) in *Prisms*, which has been taken as the expression of a death of art thesis. It would be more accurate to say that the famous phrase is a consequence of an underlying death of art thesis suggested two sentences before: 'Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter' (Adorno 1981, 33). This can be seen as an extension of the already established view that literature must work through negation. Adorno had already presented Balzac's novels as emerging from the catastrophe of French bourgeois society. Adorno might be running together the loss of the aristocratic world, presented in nostalgic and parodic terms, with the nature of the bourgeois world, in Viconian terms a movement from a heroic world of warrior aristocrats and poetry to a human world of laws and rationality. In *Negative Dialectics* the horror of the Holocaust, as symbolised by Auschwitz is amplified: 'In the camps death has a novel horror; since Auschwitz, fearing death means fearing worse than death' (2004, 371), which accordingly amplifies the horror of writing poetry. The original suggestion is that poetry is barbaric after Auschwitz: a level of horror on the level of the Holocaust infects art with the horror that has emerged in the world. The message though is at heart that art, along with philosophical writing, should adapt to a negative stand towards the horror of representing the world.

This does belong to Adorno's view that the bourgeois world is pre-apocalyptic, in the sense of containing a drive towards apocalypse. This is itself rooted in a Marxist view about the limits of literary aesthetic value when the bourgeois world apparently turns from revolution to reaction. The view is most fully articulated by Georg Lukács in *The Historical Novel*, which itself alludes to Lukács with regard to the movement from pre-bourgeois heroic world to bourgeois world (1962, 35 and 67). We can see another express of this in the Adorno and Horkheimer account of Homer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The

adventures of Odysseus are an early form of Enlightenment which does violence to nature and to myth. Myth and reason are in tension in Vico as Horkheimer noted in 'Vico and Mythology', and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* suggests that Homeric epic is part of the journey from myth to Enlightenment, which is violence on nature. That is there is always horror in art, which never has a happy state of resolution between myth and enlightenment.

This creates some difficulty for Adorno's temporality and philosophy of history. In one aspect there is no time in the development of art, because it is always full of horror, but this becomes more evident in the bourgeois world and even more so after the Holocaust. As in Vico, art has an unstable duality with means its end is always present. Epic is something always lost and is itself the loss of myth for Adorno, or for Vico, the loss of the divine age. Adorno wrote on Homer together with Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, so a text which should be seen in the light of 'Vico and Mythology'.

Odysseus is already bourgeois man for Adorno and Horkheimer, implicitly building on Vico's own view that the *Odyssey* is later than the *Iliad* and is closer to the human world. The luxury that Odysseus encounters in Calypso's cave or the land of the Phaeacians is itself evidence of a world of commerce distant from the pure warrior life of the Achilles and Hector in the *Iliad*. Though Odysseus is rooted in the barbaric warrior age for Vico, his greater acquaintance with heroic jurisprudence (NS §38/Vico 1975, 23) marks him out compared with the fierceness of the main characters of the *Iliad*. The *Odyssey* itself is a struggle with nature even in the wake Odysseus' ship leaves in the seas. It is a struggle with natural pleasure as seen in the Sirens episode where Odysseus has his men tie him to the mast of his ship, so that he can listen to the Siren song without giving way to pleasure. The isolation from his men marked in this command is a sign of bourgeois mastery.

This Marxist critique of power relations in capitalism has no obvious equivalent in Vico, who appears very convinced of the possibility of a human world within a law governed commercial society. Adorno and Horkheimer, in Viconian terms, see the human world as prolonging power based on myth. The bourgeois world is so devastated by administration and by identity thinking which reduces individuality as well as the more classic Marxist concerns commodity production, surplus value and ownership of production that any power within it apparently justified by law is no more justified than Odysseus' command of his men. This brings up issues that are not much addressed in Vico because he wrote too soon to be concerned with later concerns, Marxist and

otherwise, with bureaucratisation, the administrative state, the role of the state in promoting extractive economics, and the sense of loss of natural existence.

The beginning of that kind of discussion though can be found in Vico as Foucault suggests in his brief but significant invocation of Vico in *Discipline and Punish*. The world of disciplinarity, of Durkheimian norms enforced through a panopticon model of constant visibility has lost the poetic characteristics of a world where power cannot be contested though individual heroic struggle. Foucault does not see a literal death of art in the disciplinary world. He often focuses on literary works in which the limits of discourse and representation are an issues, so that heroic struggle in external violence are replaced by struggles of inner consciousness and its sense of limits. Adorno does not propose a full death of art either, but more the transformation of art into what can deal with the darkening of the world though a full immersion in it, striving for utopia though negating the horror of reality. Though Foucault famously compared his work with that of the Frankfurt School, he also suggests that the Frankfurt School has its value in the intersection of economic and cultural issues as dealt with in the interaction of Marx and the Frankfurt School with Weber and the Ordo-Liberals. Foucault's aesthetic reaction is less an enthusiasm for negative utopia and more an advocacy of self-stylisation which can be seen as an attempt to combine Viconian poetics with Vico's human world, making the human world less uniform and formal.

Danto

There is rather loosely a death of art in Danto (Snyder 2018, 2) in a break between art and philosophy, with a free play of art outside of the constraints of philosophy. Danto's position *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Danto 1981). The title itself refers to the sense that art has lost objective status, so that what is aesthetic might be sacral as the word 'transfiguration' implies, but only in a way that is defined through the rules and changing intersubjective consensus of art as an institution. One question in the philosophy of art is how to distinguish a work of art from other objects. The way we label and experience an art work is very much part a context in which we place the object, rather than a natural outcome of that object in itself. Danto explains this with reference to his work on the philosophy of action, in dialogue with Wittgenstein. Human actions can only have a meaning and be defined in a context. Wittgenstein and Anscombe went too far in suggesting there is no intention behind the action (Danto 1981, 4-5). Danto both suggests that Wittgenstein and Anscombe went too far in denying mental causation and that they were correct to question determination of meaning. Danto himself both says

intention is relevant to art so that Wittgenstein went too far in his institutionalism while shifting the emphasis to institutional definitions and context (Danto 1981, 6).

Meaning is different according to the circumstances of the context. We cannot talk about experiencing the object in itself, as distinct from any context. There is no knowledge of an object external from our experiencing the object as an art object, the same goes for context and naming. These thoughts are close to Derrida's deconstruction, though Danto does not this. Presumably he would have considered that institutional theory as a 'hardnecked antidote' (6) to deconstruction as much as too various forms of determinism. Danto's account assumes that natural reference and mimesis are always present, along with mental intention, but that they cannot be determined which is why an institutional theory is necessary. The context and naming always connect with something in our 'natural' perception of the art object. This pure natural experience can never take place, since there is always a context to the perception.

A great deal of contemporary art which constantly frames unlikely objects as art, even where they exist as natural objects or made objects made for non-artistic reasons. We cannot deny the logic behind such a movement, because there just is no way of saying what is an art object and what is not an art object purely on the internal qualities of an object. The predicate 'art object' provides particular difficulties with regard to deciding its scope. Art is in the end always mimesis, but the mimesis exists in a context in which we frame an object as art, label it and use information in our experience of the object and what it is imitating. What are these objects about? There is no real answer and no real answer about why authentic works are better than copies and forgeries. The only answer is in the causal history of works. Only historical causation gives the symbols meaning, and only that makes them mathematical symbols. There is no absolute origin, or abstract existence of the real object. There is no limit to the amount of repetitions with variations, trivial or not, and no authentic original can be identified. No copy or repetition is lacking in value simply because of being a copy or repetition.

Danto refers these arguments to Wittgenstein, as we've seen, along with Nelson Goodman on copies and Borges' essayistic fiction on literature as copy 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote'. Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' is surely relevant, but appears to be as far out of Danto's range of reference as Derrida. In the context of Vico, Danto's approach takes a point of departure from the lack of divinity and heroic hierarchy in art. Vico does not consider the possibility of art as endless copies, increasingly of the banal, striving to be sacral while undermining the sacred, but Danto's approach brings out one way of thinking about how the loss of

the divine, of force, of the uniqueness of the imaginative representation, as described by Vico, leaves art with a status deprived of a relation with higher value. It lacks force as do law governed communities to maintain hierarchies that refer to the sacred.

Danto's institutional approach tries to create some stability of law for art, but itself is struggling to avoid a radical version of Wittgenstein scepticism about rule following, or a related deconstructive approach which gives priority to the enactment of the paradoxes of mimetic hierarchies and bounded aestheticism. Paradoxical because mimesis inherently tries to erase the distance of the representation from the represented and aestheticism is an attempted transfiguration of the world beyond the frame of the artwork. A broadly deconstructive-radical Wittgensteinian engagement with lack of determinate meaning is one response. An institutional historical approach is an obvious alternative. Both have roots in Vico, since for Vico determinacy of meaning in language and art is eroded by the end of the heroic world. Law replaces poetry as the focus of the world of human institutions, which only becomes fully human at this point. Vico thinks of law in this human age as the Roman Emperor applying it on a case by case basis to individuals in a completely contextual way so that the universality of law is itself questioned. It is an impossible vision, which fits with Vico's assumption that the human age becomes the age of the disintegration of law and the return of primal violence. This produces a cycle of repetition. The apocalyptic aspect of Vico's philosophy of history has echoes in Derrida for whom the presence of pure meaning, pure intention could only be an apocalyptic event (1987) in which the divine possibility of the abolition of all delay, distance and uncertainty is abolished in an absolute force entering history.

For Vico, we are living in the second cycle since history began again as the Roman Empire fell (though only in the west) and a new divine age begins with the Germanic tribal invaders. Vico thought of eighteenth century Europe's mixture of strong monarchies and growing commercial society as a new human age. From this point of view, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries may be the time of disintegration as a new apocalypse approaches. Vico proposes a historicism which might contain Danto's institutionalism as well as 'deconstruction', but has a very different vision of the inevitability of collapse. The struggle for art to overcome its death might be part of avoiding disintegration and a catastrophic end of history.

Conclusion

The idea of the death of art has never meant death of art as the extinction of artistic production. It deals with the reduction of art to didacticism or decoration in an age where

philosophy or enlightenment or science or subjectivism have by passed any idea that art has a role in expressing otherwise unknowable truths. A world where the utilitarianism and trade offs of commerce is less poetic than an age of war as a normal mode of existence and aspect of citizenship. Poetry and art are more absolute and more alive to the value of the moment made more intense by violence, warrior honour and the prospect of death. As Vico suggests, the movement from warrior society to law governed commercial society can be found within the warrior epics of a heroic age. This can be extended to a view of the novel as emerging from the decline of the heroic in epic (Stocker 2018a and 2018b). The possibility of the death of poetry is contained within the original great texts of poetry, so one way of taking Vico is to build on the aspect of Vico in which the three ages of history are simultaneous which has some validity applied to Homeric epic. Art is always dying, always dead, and always alive in this case. The stadial theory of history is important in historiographical and social science terms, which themselves have significance for aesthetics, but it should be complemented by full development of an aesthetic approach concerned with constant innate tension within art between singular moments of imagination and abstract argument. We can see this even in Plato and Aristotle. Art can be ecstatic according to Plato or it can contain enthymemes, that is relatively informal modes of deductive reasoning according to Aristotle. In the context of ancient history the Athenian philosophers can seem like the death of artistic life from Homer to Euripides, in which the poetic can seem cosmos building integrated with the deepest aspects of human experience. But these aspects of art never completely disappeared and the language used here depends on the idealist-romantic aesthetics came soon after Vico's own time, a time he regarded as destined to law without poetry. Danto thought of art in his time on the model of a Warhol style of fascination with surfaces and repetition, and a Dadaesque fascination with found objects. However real this aspect is, art with more transcending and heroic qualities is also still a reality.

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