

## Vico Signifying Nothing

*The true and the made are convertible.*

—Giambattista Vico

*You only think you know what all I know. I don't even know what all I know. Half the time I just make it up and it still turns out to be true!*

—Roy Cohn, *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner

IN THIS MOMENT OF INTENSE disciplinary preoccupation with the present, going back to the Enlightenment thinker Giambattista Vico might seem counterintuitive.<sup>1</sup> I am arguing here that Vico's particular understanding of history, and the labor of history, has something to say to those growing ranks of scholars now interested not just in music and its Western technical apparatus, but in the history of sound broadly understood. At its simplest, this essay is a reflection on what overlooked Enlightenment traditions can mean for sound studies.<sup>2</sup> But we should also note that what Vico offers in *The New Science* is nothing less than a theory of history—a discipline whose role, especially in sound studies, is still remarkably underthought—performed through an unsettling rhythm of revelation and withdrawal, of grasping and slipping, of joyous seizing and dry absence.

Vico, as scholars of the period know, sets up three successive stages of human history (the age of Giants, the age of Heroes, and the age of Men) and then insists that these follow one another in a nonlinear, circular way,

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**ABSTRACT** This essay offers a reconsideration of Giambattista Vico's work for scholars interested in history, sound, and aurality. It takes as its point of departure the chronological table that stands at the opening of *The New Science*, homing in on its blind spots, raw absences, and tangled claims to objectivity. Vico's understanding of history relies—this essay goes on to argue—on a lively world of aural metaphors involved in the act of its writing: imaginary sounds, meaningless speech, false listenings, along with invented onomatopoeic etymologies. Such unruly sounds lead us to a crucial paradox of Viconian history, one that must confront all historians invested in retrieving and rewriting the stories of those who are lost, erased, and unrepresented: what role does imagination play in the writing of history? Can human invention, imagination, and even falsehood lead us toward new historical findings? The essay closes with a gloss of Vico's nascent theory of the physical and aural phenomenon of laughter, presented in the *Vici vindiciae* as a complex pathway between humanity and animality and, what's more, as a historical interface between incommensurable stages of creaturely life. REPRESENTATIONS 154. 2021 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 129–42. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2021.154.10.129>.

allowing for both forward and backward motion—thus turning an evolutionary path into a set of intersecting circular grooves. He opens book 1 of *The New Science* with a chronological table explaining the history of humanity, yet most rows in the table are empty; he pays lip service to the primacy of Christianity over other religions and histories but then disregards it almost entirely; he describes primitive humans as “senseless, stupid, ugly beasts” in one moment and sternly entreats us to understand them “in their own mode of signification” in the next (while reminding us that we cannot but fail). It is this refusal to offer a limpid, superior understanding of other civilizations and minds—while excusing nobody from the labor of thinking about the stages of civilizations, institutions, and politics—that has prompted generations of anticolonial and postcolonial thinkers to embrace Viconian history: Edward Said, Erich Auerbach, and Timothy Brennan, among others.<sup>3</sup> For thinkers such as these, embracing Vico allows for the possibility of a history that does not ultimately reinforce epistemic violence.

I want to focus on three knots here—knots well known to readers of Vico. The first is the relationship of Vico’s theory of history to a series of metaphors that are nearly but not precisely “sonotropes,” but, rather, metaphors that veer between the aural and the not-aural. Beginning with the contradictory pronouncements and loud silences in the long chronological table that unfurls at the opening of *The New Science*, Vico invites us to explore what happens to language, hearing, and the senses as we consider the irretrievable past.

The second knot examines the relationship between truth and falsehood when conjuring a historical other. One of Vico’s most famous principles, the one that effectively established history as a science, is that of *verum factum*. The true is the made, meaning that humans are able to discover the truth about what they, as a species, have made, including their own learning and knowledge. History, as the discipline that explores human-made things, is therefore the titular (New) Science. But a slightly more accurate version of the *verum factum* principle is “*verum et factum convertuntur*”—the true and the made are convertible. And this brings up the uncomfortable question of whether we are to understand that, along with the reassuring idea that humans are capable of knowing the truth about their own creations, all that is human made contains or verges toward truth. That we continue, and perhaps were always meant, to *make things up* is a troubling thought in a moment like ours—in the era not only of “fake news” but also of powerful works of imaginative scholarship such as Saidiya Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, which seek to write histories for which there is no conventional record.<sup>4</sup> In sound studies, where recording still constitutes the primary form of historical record (before that there was transcriptive technology and literary description), this is a serious matter for anyone wishing

to do historical work on anything beyond the European canon in (roughly) the twentieth century onwards.

The third knot concerns the physical and sonic phenomenon of laughter, which Vico treats with caustic insight in his pamphlet, *Vici vindiciae* (Vico's revenges). The *Vindiciae* is a mostly unloved part of his production, and for good reason: it amounts to a rather scholastic, Latin-language, and mean-spirited rebuttal of a dismissive review of the first edition of *The New Science*. Laughter enters almost by accident, as Vico, who evidently feels mocked and slandered by his reviewer, reflects on the relationship between ingenuity, truth, animality, and laughter. Yet the few paragraphs on laughter have the tone and depth of an original philosophical reflection, and, I suggest, *The New Science* can benefit from being gazed at through the slanted light they offer. There is such awesome power in Vico's notion of the backbends and plastic turns our minds and bodies do as they change toward an unfathomable thought: a power that is released in the act of losing familiarity with one's own mind, rather than in the positive return of understanding, empathizing, or reaching, a something, or someone "other" across time and space. Yet, as we will see, Vico's thoughts on laughter suggest that the labor of historical thinking may have a sound—one different from the category of song that Gary Tomlinson once unearthed as the ground of musical truth beneath Vico's thinking.

## I

At the opening of book 1 of *The New Science*, a chronological table explaining the lapse of time between the origins of various civilizations and the present is rolled out before the reader (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> The table is the same width as the book's page, but twice as long: it was printed as an oversized insert in the original edition and needed to be unfolded for perusal. From left to right, we find seven columns designated by ethnic/national groups (Hebrews, Chaldeans, Scythians, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans); running down the page is an extended timeline featuring significant dates from the Universal Deluge to the second Carthaginian War. For every date in the vertical timeline, a row is created in the "civilizations" columns, creating a multiplicity of boxes indicating significant events. Unsurprisingly, ancient Greece's column is densely populated with plenty of key dates. The Roman column comes in a distant second, but the early columns nevertheless look to the naked eye like a rhythm of empty boxes randomly and unevenly accented by the odd record.<sup>6</sup> If history as a discipline is bound up with the written record, and more broadly with the idea of inscription, then there is something at once primal and curious about what

TAVOLA CRONOLOGICA							
Descritta sopra le tre Epoche de' Tempi degli Egizj, che dicevano, tutto il Mondo innanzi essere scorto per tre Età, degli Dei, degli Eroi, e degli Huomini. A							
Ebrei B.	Celdei C.	Sciti D.	Fenici E.	Egizj F.	Greci .	Romani .	Anni del Mondo.
Diluvio Universale.	Loroasta, o Regno de' Celdei. G.						1656.
	Abreda, o Coniunzione delle Lingue I.				Giapeto, dal quale provengono i Giganti. H. Un de' quali Prometeo ruba il fuoco dal Sole. I.		1556.
				Dinastia in Egitto.	Deucalione. L.		
Chiamata d'Abraam.				Mercurio Trimagisto, il vecchio, ovvero Età degli Dei d'Egitto. M.	Età dell'oro, ovvero Età degli Dei di Grecia. N.		
					Elleno figlio di Deucalione, nipote di Prometeo, pronipote di Giapeto, per tre suoi figliuoli sparsi nella Grecia tre Dialetti. O.		1080.
					Corno Egeio innalzato in Attica, dalle quali poi sono composte Atene. P.		
					Cadmo fonda Tebe in Beozia, ed introduce in Grecia le lettere volgari. Q.		2448.
Iddio dà la legge scritta a Mosè.						Saturno ovvero l'Età degli Dei del Lazio. R.	2491.
				Memoro Trimagisto, il giovane, o Età degli Eroi d'Egitto. S.	Dario Egizio caccia gli Inachidi dal Regno d'Atene. T. Pelope figlio regna nel Peloponneso.		2553.
					Eruclidi sparsi per tutta Grecia, che vi fanno l'età degli Eroi. V.	Aborigeni.	2600.
	Mino regna con gli Asij.				Custi in Creta, Sabazia, ovvero Italia, ed in Asia, che vi hanno Regni di Scizziti. V.		2650.
		Dioneo da Tirone va a Fenicia a cartagine. X.			Minosse Re di Creta, primo Legislatore delle Genti, e primo Censore dell'Egitto.		2880.
		Tiro scelerata per la navigazione, e per le colonie.			Orfeo, e con esso lui l'Età de' Reati Telegoni. X. Ercole, con cui è al colmo il Tempo Eroico di Grecia. Z.	Arcaidi.	
		Sannazaro scrive l'epica in lettere volgari. Aa.			Giuseppe da principio alle guerre navali con quella di Roda. Bb. Peloponneso fonda Atene, e vi ordina l'Arceopogo. Guerra Trojana. Bb.	Ercole o Epandro nel Lazio, ovvero Reo degli Eroi d'Italia.	2800.
					Errori degli Eroi, ed in ispezia d'Ulisse, e di Enea.		2850.
Regno di Sulle.						Regno d'Alba.	2900.
				Sesostri regna in Tebe. Cc.	Colonia Greche in Asia, in Sicilia, in Italia. Dd.		2940.
					Ligiurgo dà la legge a Locademoni.		3000.
					Ulissechi Olimpici, prima ordinati da Ercole, poi intermessi, e restituiti da Iulio. Ee.		3020.
						Fondazione di Roma. Ff.	
					Omero, il quale venne in tempo, che non si eran ancor tracciate le lettere volgari, e il quale non vide l'Egitto. Gg.	Ninve Re.	3100.
				Pennidico apre l'Egitto a' Greci, e fonda Grecia, e Italia. Hh.	Esopo, Moral Filosofo Volgare. Hh.		3330.
					Sette Saggi di Grecia, de' quali uno, Solone ordina la libertà popolare d'Atene; l'altro, Solone Mitene dà l'incoronamento alla Filosofia con la Fisica. Ii.		3400.
Ciro regna in Asia co' Persiani.					Pitagora, di cui scrive due Livro, che rammentano il suo padre rapito in Roma. Jj.	Servio Tullio Re. Mm.	3460.
					I Pittiracchi Tiranni cacciati da Atene.		3490.
						I Torquari Tiranni cacciati da Roma.	3490.
					Esiodo, Poeta, Ippocrate. Oo.		3500.
	Idamuro Re di Svezia.				Guerra Peloponnesiaca. Tucidide, il qual scrive, che fin a suo padre i Greci non sapevano nulla della disciplina loro propria; onde si fonda a scrivere di cotai guerre. Qq.		3550.
					Socrate dà principio alla Filosofia Morale ragionata. Platone fiorisce nella Metaphisica. Atene s'abbandona di tutte l'arti della più colta Umanità. Rr.		
					Sunzonte, con portar l'armi Greche nelle viscere della Persia, e il primo a sapere con qualche certezza le cose Persiane. Ss.	Legge della XII. Tavole.	555.
					Alessandro Magno rovescia nella Macedonia la Monarchia Persiana; ed Aristotele, che vi si porta in persona, narra, che i Greci rimanni avevan detto favole delle cose dell'Oriente.	Legge Esuliana. Tt.	568.
						Legge Pbilis. Vv.	566.
						Guerra di Taranto, ove s'incominciano a conoscer tra loro i Latini co' Greci. Xx.	508.
						Guerra Cartaginese seconda, da cui comincia la guerra civile Romane a Livio; il qual più professò non sapere tra nessuno. Yy.	380.

FIGURE 1. Giambattista Vico, "Tavola cronologica," in *La scienza Nuova* (1744; reprint, Naples, 2015), 36.

this table offers: it is more scroll than page, more empty grid than information, more lines than words, and almost more blank paper than ink.

It is easy to imagine such a table buttressing an argument about the primacy of more literate civilizations or the equation of a wealth of written records with higher literacy and therefore development; the chronological table could easily have been the grounds for an ordering of world history according to the rhythm of ancient Greece. Indeed, the third book of *The New Science* is devoted to the age-old question of the identity of Homer, and indeed, Greco-Roman antiquity would, shortly after the third edition of *The New Science*, and as a consequence of the discovery of the ruins of Pompeii in 1748, become newly idealized as the cradle of Western civilization. Yet Vico presents the table as both conscious of its limits and as living and emergent, as if its writing were prone to change almost under our eyes. He opens book 1 of *The New Science* thus:

This chronological table presents, in order of appearance, the world of ancient nations; which, starting with the Universal Deluge, turns from the Hebrews to the Chaldeans, Scythians, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, until their second Carthaginian war. And in the table appear men, or deafeningly noisy events which have been dated or placed in certain ways by the community of scholars; and these men, or events, either didn't occur in the times and places that have been assigned to them, or were not in the world at all. And out of extended, thickest darkness rise famous men and highly relevant events; and from these men and events, and with them, many of the greatest moments of human affairs occurred. I will demonstrate all of this in these annotations, so as to give you an understanding of the extent to which the humanity of nations has uncertain, unseemly, flawed, or empty beginnings.<sup>7</sup>

The blend of rigor and contradiction, of exposition and disavowal, is both deeply unsettling and, to any reader schooled in deconstruction, eerily familiar. Referring to events like the Universal Deluge, Vico evokes not their renown but their deafening noise (the original term is a feast of sibilants—"romorosissimi"), before informing us that such an event, although notated in the table as the beginning of all history, may not have occurred at all in that time, place, or even in that world. Its presence in the table is, in other words, a representation of a discomfort at the very root of history and writing. This is at the very least a sign of cognitive dissonance between a theological understanding of the beginning of history and its disavowal.<sup>8</sup> But we can go deeper: as he will later explain, Vico doesn't consider fables and myths to be mere fiction; rather, they are representations of events that couldn't be accounted for in rational language. For Vico, events recounted in religious writing and myth have a fundamental grounding in reality—and are often geological, giving us a human sense of what we would now call Deep Time. The Deluge marks the presence of something that did happen,

and the Bible is merely an unfortunate, distorted, and unreliable (to recall Vico's wording about the origins of humanity: "unseemly, flawed, or empty") record of its occurrence. It belongs to the chronological table outlining the origin of humanity; and yet, it is not of it. The written word quakes, makes noise, not as some kind of unattainable historical sublime, but as a kind of flickering vanishing point. Likewise, the sparse events dotting the otherwise empty columns of the other national groups are not the marks of an undeveloped, uneventful civilization, but a testimony to the blindness experienced by historians as they grope for truth. As illustrious events framed by cell after void cell, they give us a glimpse of writing's opposite: not a happy premodern presence, not Rousseau's primordial speech-singing, but darkness, emptiness, nothing.<sup>9</sup>

I insist on these figures of noise and darkness because I worry that, in the hands of more Romantic souls, they might be taken for a negative image of the fullness of presence, a kind of overwhelming sublime, a sensuous negative aesthetics. Vico's idiosyncratic vision of language and enlightenment, combined with a somewhat orientalist appreciation of his Neapolitan roots, risks appearing as a kind of sensualist abandon, as if his anti-Cartesian invective amounted to a mere revaluation of the body and the senses. For us, scholars of music, such an appraisal is particularly troublesome, as we hail from a discipline whose value was established by Romantic and post-Romantic thinkers who valued above anything else the truth of the overwhelmed senses, and music's ability to deliver that truth. It is important to remember, then, when looking at Vico's chronological table, that it caps a book attempting to establish history as a science—the latter a term that for Vico is not unlike our understanding of natural science. The pull between dry classification and dizzying uncertainty, between sensuous metaphor and nothingness, is in part an articulation of this particular tension. The empty boxes in the table arise, that is, out of the earnest desire to treat historical events like a natural taxonomy; and the emptiness is likewise earnest, frustrating, telling.<sup>10</sup> When Vico tells us of the "empty" beginnings of humanity, while rolling out a column of empty boxes in a chronological table, we have to pause at "the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."<sup>11</sup> For such nothings are evidently a kind of simultaneous blind spot and interface; they are generated at the junction of historians' effort to know and the motion of the historical object toward them.

Let's lower ourselves further down the ravine of Viconian interfaces and blind spots. The first hurdle of historical imagination Vico presents is that of imagining the earliest humans, their cosmology and relationship to language. This effort he dubs metaphysical, because it indeed leads us back to the first principles of humanity as a species; and yet it is also an anthropological effort to understand the remnants of forms of worship and

divination—and animism—as knowledge and language (in his words “poetic metaphysics”) that, while superseded by modern forms of knowledge (indeed, Vico is not sentimental about premodern consciousness), carries an irreducible kernel of truth. And so sacred history must be examined, against the grain of the modern historian’s mind, as a means of knowing the beginnings of the human species:

From these first men, stupid, insensate, and horrible beasts, all the philosophers and philologists should have begun their investigations of the wisdom of the ancient gentiles; that is, from the giants understood (as we just have) in their own terms . . . and [the philosophers and philologists] should have begun from metaphysics, which seeks its proofs not in the external world but within the modifications of the mind of those who meditate it.<sup>12</sup>

More twists and turns. Here Vico admonishes scholars not to overlook the wisdom of those who created religious texts and myths—not as a polite concession to cultural relativism but as an invitation to understanding human metaphysics—that is, humanity’s first principles. But then comes a spectacular definition of metaphysics as what is generated by the change of the mind thinking it: a plastic image of a thought that turns its back on itself in the act of knowledge. The mind does so the moment it attempts to think its origins, and it is that knotted thinking that creates the simultaneous interface and blind spot: the emptiness in the chronological table and the almost emergent, fugitive quality of the writing found therein.

Here we might glimpse why postcoloniality and anthropology have drawn so eagerly from Vico. The tenor of these considerations is broadly anthropological: how to create a space of imagination between incompatible forms of knowledge held together by positing a common human species. That is the question at the heart of Vico’s understanding of the Universal Deluge as a kind of primordial history that belongs and yet does not belong to the chronological table. But allowing the mind to harvest proofs of its history in its own modifications also implicitly sanctions a history that is invented, imagined outright. And Vico practices what he preaches—*The New Science* is famous for making liberal use of entirely invented etymologies. For instance, it traces the origin of the word “myth” to the root of the word “mute”—destroying in one fell swoop all Romantic links between myth and sound, and naming mythical times the “tempi mutoli” (silent times).<sup>13</sup> Thinking the history of language otherwise (using phonetic similarity as a means of relating disparate terms) can be a means of accessing truth. Vico defines religious histories as a form of truth that is at once—by modern standards—a falsehood, a dictum that hints at the fact that the falsehood is not a detachable layer of truth, but an interface, and the only means of access: history as a brazenly political act of will against documented truth.<sup>14</sup>

In these moments, he seems almost to align with the program of a decolonial history: a history, that is, responding to the lack of record not only by acknowledging erasure and violence but also by actively rebelling against it and offering an alternative, reconstructed, imagined history in its place.

... Almost. The space between truth and falsehood, between documentation and invention, remains as fraught for Vico as it does for us. At times one gets the sense that Vico's "falsehood" is just the inevitable consequence of the labor of historians, who must bend uncomfortably beyond their knowledge and understanding of truth in order to arrive at the truth of another. Yet Vico's insistence on the notion of "falsehood" (instead, perhaps, of a more liberal relativist understanding of truth) means that this painful brushing against the grain of history guarantees precious little. We may twist ourselves toward necessary falsehood to imagine the unimaginable and still end up with nothing. Take, for instance, the famous passage in book 2 where Vico imagines the origin of language as the result of a primordial human response to the thunderclap, a passage that has since been reinterpreted into a modernist icon in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. It is all too often forgotten that Vico chases this spectacular moment of revelation with a disconcerting reflection on the way moderns respond to the animist idea of "sympathetic nature":

But the nature of our civilized minds is so detached from the senses . . . 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*. . . . That is why we said above that we can scarcely understand, still less imagine, how those first men thought who founded gentile humanity.<sup>15</sup>

Underneath what might seem like mourning for the modern loss of the immediacy of sensuous language runs a cool stream made up of the repeated words at the heart of this passage: "nothing," "false." These two words pivot on the elusive "vast image" of Sympathetic Nature. In the effort to conjure this image, modern humans come up with nothing: an emptiness of mind, the signifier lacking a signified, a melting into empty sound. So far, we could still be in the realm of a Romantic Vico, a kind of *ante litteram* Hugo von Hofmannsthal in the *Letter to Lord Chandos*—"Abstract words melt in my mouth like rotten mushrooms." And here Vico uses the notion of falsity (with its implication of objectivity and truth) to desensualize the lot. False is the nothingness facing the mind that attempts to reach back for an impression of premodernity; and—this is even more troubling—*vast and false* would also be the image we summoned to ourselves even if we could supplant our reasonable language with imagination. Yet no documentable



truth comes to save us from any of this: falseness is the unavoidable horizon of the historical imagination. Coming from someone who, a paragraph earlier, re-imagined the moment in which primitive humans first heard a thunderclap as an animate being, this is a hard slap in the face.

## II

None of this will be news to dedicated readers of Vico—but then again, radical defamiliarization needs repeated performance, since its sting is as keen as it is transient. Tomlinson’s eloquent close to his seminal essay “Vico’s Songs” could equally work as a close to all my considerations here: “There is no going native, Vico already taught us, only the necessity to try.”<sup>16</sup> But, though for Tomlinson there is some consolation in the notion of song as the basis for a kind of contrarian empiricism of the familiar, I am less willing to be consoled. I want there to be a sound that is not the object of the defamiliarizing effort, the grounding continuum of human history, but the sound of defamiliarization, of the useless and imperative labor of history. No such sound exists, of course, not outright. First, it is odd to imagine a kind of sound (rather than, say, an ethical mode of listening) that carries out this irreducible work of defamiliarization; and second, the idea of sound is still so entangled with notions of physical presence that the idea that particular sounds might somehow store not presence but distance and absence feels nonsensical. Defamiliarization, doubt, self-reflexivity—these are all the work of the “dubious ear” (to recall Ana María Ochoa Gautier’s beautiful expression), not something that is lodged in sensory data.<sup>17</sup> But of course if we think of sound not just as sensory data but as a collective, grooved-in, millenary act of imagination, a conglomerate of discourse, bodily practice, and aurality built over time, then we can imagine that within certain traditions, certain sounds indeed carry out the work of defamiliarization (just as others stand for sensory fullness): some sounds work to make audible the very short circuits of human imagination, its negative aspects, the blind spots of our ears and minds. I am reaching here for an aural equivalent of Sianne Ngai’s “aesthetic categories”—uncomfortable thoughts turned into things.<sup>18</sup> And it is with this definition—of defamiliarization made audible—that I approach the notion of laughter, as a way of closing this essay, and considering, indeed, the sounds of the labor of history.

By the time Vico considered laughter, philosophically, and really almost by mistake, in the process of striking back at his reviewer in the *Vici vindiciae*, the backbone of the Western philosophy of laughter consisted, to be brief, of a series of inventive readings, misreadings, and Catholic twists on Aristotle’s pronouncements on the subject, which are themselves gnomic,

sparse, and not particularly easy to connect one to another. Aristotle had defined humans in the *Metaphysics* as the animals possessing language/reason (*logos*); then, in *On the Parts of Animals*, he mentioned that humans are the only animals who laugh; and then in the *Poetics*, he famously associated laughter with mirth at someone's inferiority. It is interesting that, in the reception of Aristotle and the tempering of these scraps of philosophy with a sterner vision of human physical manifestations, the act of laughing itself (rather than the object of laughter) became unseemly, distorting, and associated with the loss (or outright lack) of reason. This may be the reason why (and I am not the first to make this point) laughter came to be tackled, even disciplined, through moralizing theories of causality and humor, theories that only really considered the definition of laughter in the *Poetics*.<sup>19</sup> This hegemonic and political shift away from the phenomenon of laughter and toward an intellectual consideration only of its causes is something that Vico uniquely and implicitly challenges, bringing us back, therefore, to aurality.<sup>20</sup> Specifically, Vico's contribution to this by then continuous and heterodox string of Aristotelian laughter theories is that, instead of trying to smooth away the contradictions between the accreted philosophical scraps on laughter, he congeals them into a tight paradox concerning the switch from animal to human. Laughter, he writes, results from the uneven move from one thought to another—a lapse in *logos*, a flailing of the mind caught in between:

Therefore, when the brain fibers, focused on an appropriate and suitable object, are disturbed by an unexpected one, they become disordered. Being agitated, they transmit their restless motion to all branches of the nervous system. This shakes the whole body and removes man from his normal state. Animals are deprived of laughter because they have one sense only, which enables them to pay attention to but one object at a time. Hence, any one object is continuously expelled and deleted by the subsequent one. It is thus perfectly obvious that since animals have been denied by nature the ability to laugh, they are also deprived of all reason.<sup>21</sup>

It is the in-betweenness, the cracked space between two thoughts, the vacillation of the mind, wherein laughter resides: the phenomenon of a mind tripping over itself. But—and this is where the interpretation of Aristotle takes flight—this temporary loss of reason, of the ability to connect thought to thought, is restricted to the human. Other animals have far greater powers of concentration than most humans—but for that reason they cannot think several things at once, for better and worse. For better, because they cannot fall in the space between two thoughts; for worse, because the ability to hold several thoughts at once is, here, the definition of *logos* and reason. And so—this capacity for multiplicity defines humanity as the

species that not only has reason but also manifestly *loses* it. Indeed, says Vico, humans know themselves to be such when they laugh:

At this point, I must mention that those who laugh at a serious thing are secretly impelled to do so, even if they do not realize it. Precisely because laughter is a human prerogative, they feel that by laughing they are experiencing that they are men. But laughter comes from our feeble human nature, which “deceives us by the semblance of right.” And, in fact, from this interpretation of laughter, laughing men [*ridiculi*] are halfway between austere, serious men and animals.<sup>22</sup>

Here, then, is our biopolitical paradox: laughter is the loss of logos specific to the only species that has logos. It is so species-specific that humans unwittingly perform their own humanity by manifestly losing that which makes them human, without, however, lapsing into animality. This means that laughter—against the grain of emergent strands of Christian theology that equated laughter with beasts and beasts with a lower, prehuman state—does not make humans animals, but rather leads them back toward animality without ever arriving there. Laughter becomes an in-between state that both opens and forecloses the path to another species.

And what has this to do with the labor of history and its patterns of defamiliarization? It seems that, with laughter, Vico has found a way of encapsulating the twisting form of a mind going against itself, and going against itself in a way that leads us toward an impossible moment of origin for the human species—the unquantifiable, impossible leap from animal to human. And we must remember that these points of origin—the impossibility of pinning them down, and the necessity of accounting for them—lie at the root of the very idea of history that Vico unfolds for us in his magnum opus. So laughter echoes the plastic definition of metaphysics as the change of the mind that thinks itself, and, more to the point, it sonifies the frustrating layers of falseness and blindspots forever faced by a mind thinking its way back to premodern humanity. In other words, the question of truth and falsity returns in Vico’s discussion of laughter—and does so in as convoluted and strange a form as ever. Midway through his invective in the *Vindiciae*, Vico says that laughter is a response both to those who say false things in order ultimately to say the truth (mostly to create an amusing shortcut to stage-by-stage reasoning) and to those who present false information in the form of truth. And now the image of contortion is driven home:

By using a certain force or violence on themselves, on their minds, and on truth, they take “that which is” and contort it into something else.<sup>23</sup>

And so, the mind twisting out of shape is both the particular form of metaphysical thinking (“which seeks its proofs not in the external world but

within the modifications of the mind of those who meditate it”) and of what is described in this quotation: the deliberate perversion of truth. Vico, yet again, offers us no easy way of discriminating between good and bad contortions of the mind. We are destined to make things up. But the torsion, the torsion of the mind morphing as it thinks and makes history: that we have, and we know by ear.

## Notes

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1. Returning to Enlightenment thinkers has been, however, a recurrent move in musicology and ethnomusicology of the past thirty years: see, for instance, Philip V. Bohlman’s *Song Loves the Masses: Herder on Music and Nationalism* (Berkeley, 2017); Gary Tomlinson’s postcolonial work on Jacques Derrida and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in “Ideologies of Aztec Songs,” in “Music Anthropologies and Music Histories,” special issue, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 343–79; and Gary Tomlinson, “Vico’s Songs: Detours at the Origins of (Ethno)Musicology,” *Musical Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 344–77.
2. Crucial is Timothy Brennan’s recent investigation on Vico in relation to twentieth-century political philosophy, *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel, and the Colonies* (Stanford, 2014), esp. chap. 1. Brennan, who contrasts the (thus far limited) impact of Vico on leftist political philosophies with Baruch Spinoza’s great importance to Marxist philosophers of the 1960s and ’70s, argues that Vico is a far better thinker for anticoloniality and anti-imperialist thinking. This is a striking point and a purposeful derailing of the reception of Vico as the father of a narrower brand of historicism (via Benedetto Croce and Isaiah Berlin). My thinking here is equally antihistoricist and, in this respect, highly influenced by Brennan’s archaeology of Vico.
3. Aside from Brennan’s *Borrowed Light*, see Edward Said, “Vico on the Discipline of Bodies and Texts,” *MLN* 9, no. 15 (Oct. 1976): 817–26; Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 2003).
4. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York, 2019). Hartman’s choice to write this kind of history comes from her lifelong advocacy for anti-enlightenment, anti-objective, subterranean histories of Black self-making.
5. The three different editions of *The New Science* (1725, 1730, and 1744) tend to be treated by Vico scholars as three different sources, because Vico altered each one considerably. But I am making no such distinction: as far as I can see, all the passages I cite in the main text recur in all three editions. The Italian edition I use is the critical edition from the Istituto per la Storia del Pensiero Filosofico Moderno, Giambattista Vico, *La scienza nuova 1744*, available at *ISPF-Lab: Laboratorio dell’ISPF* 12 (2015), [http://www.ispf-lab.cnr.it/2015\\_101.pdf](http://www.ispf-lab.cnr.it/2015_101.pdf). All translations into English, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.
6. A modern historian who exemplifies the Viconian thinking about gaps—and fictions—is Hayden White; see his essay “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1980): 5–27. There,

- White considers closely the expressive meaning of severely gapped annals such as the Annals of Saint Gall, recalling events from the eighth, ninth, and tenth century AD.
7. Vico, *La scienza nuova* 1744, 37.
  8. Brennan insists on Vico's apparent espousal and effective disregard of Christian theology in establishing the beginnings of humanity—a tension of which the strange inclusion of the Great Deluge as the earliest historical event on the table could indeed be a symptom. On Vico's tense relationship with Christian doctrine, see Brennan, *Borrowed Light*, 30.
  9. As I wrote about the chronological table, I was haunted by this passage by Catherine Malabou in which she is stepping beyond Derrida's "grammatology": "There is always something other than writing in writing. This 'other thing' is not inevitably an utterance or a presence. This nongraphic supplement does not introduce a logocentric residue, but it marks the difference of the grammatological instance from itself, which is also its end"; Catherine Malabou, "The End of Writing? Grammatology and Plasticity," *European Legacy* 12, no. 4 (2007): 431–41.
  10. See Naomi Waltham-Smith, "Confronting Continental Philosophy's Fears of Biologism," *Music & Science* 1 (2018): 1–10. Waltham-Smith writes about this very tension between, and ultimately plastic junction of, natural science and philosophy. In the process of conjuring images for the way natural science and philosophy interface when it comes to listening, Waltham-Smith comes to the metaphor of an aural blind spot: a place of nonknowledge that can, however, spring only from the genuine harkening toward knowledge. Her notion of the blind spot inspired mine here.
  11. This is a sly quote from Wallace Stevens's famous poem "The Snow Man" (1921). The final tercet of the poem reads: "For the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is"; Wallace Stevens, "The Snow Man," Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45235/the-snow-man-56d224a6d4e90>.
  12. Vico, *La scienza nuova* 1744, 103. The passage is in book 2, chap. 4 (Della metafisica poetica, che ne dà l'origini della poesia, dell'idolatria, della divinazione, e de' sagrifizj).
  13. *Ibid.*, 113, or book 2, chap. 6 (Della logica poetica).
  14. See *ibid.*, 70, or book 1, chap. 2 (Degli elementi), chap. 47; 70 in modern edition. Also, a particular relationship of truth and falsehood is Vico's definition of the trope (mode of speech) of irony—one in which, though, falsehood takes on the appearance or mask of truth—a definition that takes on complex meaning in the face of Vico's earlier unsteady of the binary between truth and falsehood, and connects, as we shall see, to the issue of laughter. See *ibid.*, 116, or book 2, chap. 7 (Corollarj d'intorno a' tropi, mostri, e trasformazioni poetiche).
  15. *Ibid.*, 103 or book 2, chap. 4 (Della metafisica poetica), my emphasis.
  16. Tomlinson, "Vico's Songs," 373.
  17. Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC, 2014).
  18. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA, 2015).
  19. The point about the modern disinterest in the physical phenomenon of laughter is made by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA,

- 1968), and the effort to retrieve laughter's meaning away from comedy is the subject of Anca Parvulescu's excellent *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).
20. The ambiguity between the subject and object of laughter in the word "risibilis" is actually relaying the same ambiguity in Aristotle's Greek, which uses the term "gelastikos," from "gelos"—laughter. From what I understand, this ambiguity was already fading by the time Vico wrote in Latin about laughter and is much harder to find in nineteenth-century writing about laughter.
  21. Giambattista Vico, "Vindications of Vico" (1725), trans. Thora Ilin Bayer and Donald Phillip Verene in *Giambattista Vico: Keys to the "New Science"* (Ithaca, 2008), 118.
  22. *Ibid.*
  23. *Ibid.*, 119.