1995


Dan Ben-Amos  
*University of Pennsylvania, dbamos@sas.upenn.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers](http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers)  
Part of the [Cultural History Commons](http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers), [Folklore Commons](http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers), and the [Near and Middle Eastern Studies Commons](http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers)

**Recommended Citation**  

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers/79](http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers/79)  
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

**Abstract**
Joseph Mali, a historian of ideas, might not have heard of folklore as an academic discipline. He does not index the term, nor does he indicate in any other way his awareness of the existence of folklore as scholarship. In this entire volume, he mentions "folklore" only three or four times: twice in connection with the traditions of nonliterate societies (pp. 102, 139), and once (p. 197) in reference to Milman Parry's—but not Albert Lord's—formulaic theory. A fourth time can be considered when he compares Vico's term *sensus communis* and Herder's *volkgeist*, establishing an affinity, if not an identity, between one of Vico's basic concepts (Schaeffer 1990) and one of the folklore's fundamental ideas. Yet, fortuitously, Mali's book is a major contribution to the study of folklore, the history of its ideas, and the analysis of its theoretical foundations.

**Disciplines**
Cultural History | Folklore | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

This review is available at ScholarlyCommons: [http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers/79](http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers/79)
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY


DAN BEN-AMOS
University of Pennsylvania

Joseph Mali, a historian of ideas, might not have heard of folklore as an academic discipline. He does not index the term, nor does he indicate in any other way his awareness of the existence of folklore as scholarship. In this entire volume, he mentions "folklore" only three or four times: twice in connection with the traditions of nonliterate societies (pp. 102, 139), and once (p. 197) in reference to Milman Parry's—but not Albert Lord's—formulaic theory. A fourth time can be considered when he compares Vico's term sensus communis and Herder's volksgeist, establishing an affinity, if not an identity, between one of Vico's basic concepts (Schaeffer 1990) and one of the folklore's fundamental ideas. Yet, fortuitously, Mali's book is a major contribution to the study of folklore, the history of its ideas, and the analysis of its theoretical foundations.

Upon reading The Rehabilitation of Myth, it becomes clear that Giovanni Battista Vico (1668–1744) was a thinker who articulated the ideas that later made folklore studies possible. His book Principi di scienza nuova d'intorno alla comune natura della nazioni (1744), known in English in its translation by Thomas G. Bergin and Max H. Fisch as The New Science of Giambattista Vico (1984), serves as the turning point in European thought that cleared the way for the systematic inquiry into vulgar narratives, vulgar languages, vulgar wisdom, and vulgar religions. The phonetic shift from the Latin vulgus into the "good Saxon" term folk (Thoms 1965:5) thereby gains a new significance.

Giuseppe Cocchiara (1981:103–116, 120–127) had already considered Vico as a major link in the historical chain of folklore ideas. Tracing the chain of development from the new humanism of the Renaissance to the cultural evolutionism of the 19th century, the European populism and the rise of modernism in the 20th century, Cocchiara positions his 18th-century fellow countryman between Father Joseph Francois Lafiteau (1681–1746) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). For him, Vico is a diachronic mediator who enabled the formulation of "a science of customs" on the basis of their description. In contrast, Mali studies Vico's New Science synchronically in "the historical integrity of his own time" (Kuhn 1962:3) and regards him as a scientific revolutionary who, in spite of the fact that he often opted for the middle course between rivaling philosophies (i.e., pp. 109–120, 173–178, 192, 215–216), ended up formulating an approach to humanistic and social thought that countered the rationalism of the Enlightenment (cf. Berlin 1980:1–25, 111–129).

Such a historical analysis of Vico's thought is bound to be paradoxical because it requires the synchronic examinations of ideas of a man who, by all accounts, was out of sync with, or much ahead of, his own time. Mali solves this dilemma by analyzing Vico's thought, in the context of the seminal ideas of scientists, philosophers, and theologians in the generations that preceded him, or as a response to long-standing issues in the history of European philosophy. He also points out that 18th-century Naples, while not the intellectual hub of Europe, was neither an isolated outpost. Quite likely, Vico's father's bookstore was an additional source of intellectual nourishment for him. In Mali's portrayal, Vico was not a recluse but a man of his time who offered to his readers a new scientific method and a new subject for a systematic research. His awareness of contemporaneous thought made his originality even greater.
Unacknowledged in his own time, Vico was “discovered” 80 years after his death by the French historian Jules Michelet who published in 1827 an abridged French translation of the New Science that placed Vico on the map of European thought. Although outside Italy intellectual attention has been slow to gather momentum, nevertheless writers and philosophers read him. The enigmatic, often obscure, nature of his writings makes many interpretations possible, often reasonable. As a “master text” (White 1976:198) of Western thought, the New Science has allowed each new generation, or new discipline, to find in Vico a distant echo of, or rather an anticipator of, their own ideas. Disciplines such as history, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, political science, law, and psychology, and research directions and philosophies ranging from positivism, to Marxism, semiotics, structuralism, poststructuralism, modernism, and postmodernism have already staked their claims to Vico’s ideas.

For the last quarter of a century, there has been a resurrection of Vico studies in this country (Tagliacozzo 1993:29-45), accompanied by the publication of an annual New Vico Studies (1983-); the establishment of a research center, “The Institute for Vico Studies” (in New York since 1974 and also at Emory University, Atlanta, since 1983); and a series of bibliographies (Crease 1978; Donzelli 1973; Battistini 1983; Gianturco 1968; Tagliacozzo et al. 1986; and a series of annual bibliographical supplements in New Vico Studies) that account for what Mali calls “the Vichian industry” (p. 1).

Mali argues that “the rehabilitation of myth”—a phrase he borrows from Jean Pierre Vernant—is at the center of Vico’s New Science. Such a shift in the Western approach to myth indicates a starting point of “revisionism in various spheres of knowledge” (p. 3). Mali does not count folklore as one of them, but he should have, since by proposing myth as the master key for the understanding of Vico’s book, he not only legitimizes folklore studies as a latecomer to the Vichian bandwagon but also prepares the ground for the suggestion that, as a discipline, folklore should have had a leading role in the Vichian revival to begin with. Hence, the implications of Mali’s book should be that, more than any other discipline, folklore is the direct heir to Vico’s philosophy, and it is possible to date the emergence of folklore studies with the publication of the New Science.

In the history of ideas, the moment of inception could have a defining capacity (Abrahams 1993:8-13). Richard Dorson approached the question of the beginning of folklore as a nominalist: the study began the moment Williams Thoms named it in print on 22 August 1846 (Dorson 1968:75-90); accordingly its historical roots were within the English tradition of antiquarianism to which Thoms belonged. In contrast, Bakhtin (1968:4), a realist in this case, considers naming the final, rather than the initial, stage in concept formation. He regards the idea of folklore as evolving out of the class encounter between the Renaissance intellectuals and creative writers, and the popular festivals and the comic languages of the marketplace. The more general scholarly consensus, as stated by Linda Dégh (1979:87), and recently reaffirmed by Charles Briggs (1993), dates the start of the science of folklore to the scholarship of the Brothers Grimm, in which the practice of recording texts from oral tradition converged with the ideology of nationalism.

The shift of the starting point of folklore to Vico’s New Science that appeared in three editions between 1725 and 1744 is not a minor historical-geographical quibble but an attempt to outline, with Mali’s help, a revision of the history of folklore ideas—a revision that responds to the changing paradigms in folklore research itself, that places folklore in the context of European thought, and that, at the same time, underscores the unique position folklore has in its history.

Mali discusses the position of myth in Vico’s New Science in four chapters—“The Revision of Science,” “The Revision of Civilization,” “The Revision of Mythology,” and “The Revision of History”—and the clever “Conclusion.” As these chapter headings and the book title indicate, Mali conceives of Vico primarily as a revisionist. The meaning of such a label derives from current discourse in historical-
political theory, and not from the history of science and ideas, in which Vico's role would have been nothing short of revolutionary. In a philosophic-scientific context he presented an alternative model to the dominant paradigm of the Enlightenment rationality.

As students of folklore, we would recognize many of our theoretical assumptions and methodological principles in Mali's description of revisionism as entailing

a re-evaluation of apparently scientific explanations by more casual considerations, the reduction of universal theories to local practices and accidents, the elevation of poetic sensibilities over against logical ratiocinations—both among the historical agents as among those who study them. Seen in this way revisionism would imply not so much a modern view of the past but a view of modernity from past perspectives. For the revisionist considers human beings to be essentially traditional, living in an immemorial and largely impersonal structure of meaning, of which they are only dimly aware, and which they cannot, nor should, change by radical intellectual or political acts. Believing thus that behind all the forms of modern rationalism there lurk past and continuous traditions of belief, the revisionist scholars attempt to expose in them the poetic images and habitual practices which resist progressive, never mind revolutionary, categories; they seek, as a rule, to read historical documents as if from the point of view of those who were immersed in the very process which later scholars describe in their own modern terms and theories. [p. 14]

According to Mali's outline, revisionism would support the centrality of folklore, a discipline with tradition at its core, in the postmodern interdisciplinary discourse. In taking this position, he only follows the lead of his subject. Vico states unequivocally that "the first science to be learned should be mythology or the interpretation of fables; for, as we shall see, all the histories of the gentiles have their beginnings in fables, which were the first histories of the gentile nations. By such a method the beginnings of sciences as well as of the nations are to be discovered, for they sprang from the nations and from no other source" (New Science, 51).1

Vico and Mali use the terms myth, mythology, and fables not as specific folklore genres but as general poetic modes of thought and expression. The substitution of folklore for myth is an obvious anachronism, yet it clarifies the semantic scope of myth in terms of current meanings, because in its present intellectual incarnation, folklore intricately conveys similar meanings that the concept of "myth" did for Vico. Not accidentally, when Mali seeks to relate to the modern reader Vico's sense of the power of myth, he chooses no other phrase than Marshall McLuhan's dictum "the medium is the message" (p. 9), which resonates throughout modern folklorists.

The correlation between the concept of myth and modern folkloristics has deeper historical intellectual roots that go farther than Marshall McLuhan and his Mechanical Bride (1951). Mali, who, like Vico, seeks confirmation for his interpretations in etymology, points out that the negative attributes associated with the concept of myth are not inherent in the term itself and mythologiein is the poetic speech that is "the discourse of tradition which consists in repeating what they say" (p. 3; cf. p. 7). His conception of the oral nature of myth as a performed discourse would have received further confirmation in Richard Martin's analysis of the Iliad, as he regards the term muthos "a word for 'performance' in the sense of authoritative self-presentation to an audience" (1989:231), or from Gregory Nagy, who suggests that myth "is a derivative of the same root from which muo is derived; its special meaning seems to be 'special speech' as opposed to everyday speech" (1990:32). Thus Mali's emphasis on Vico's revision of the conception of myth to the idea of "poetic language" that it connoted in ancient Greece implicitly suggests that the modern folkloristic concern with poetics and performance only reinstates the speaking poetic voice that folklore had, and has, in ancient and current societies, to its theoretical discourse.

Joseph Mali views his analysis as "an attempt to elaborate the full meaning and implications of one singular notion that undergirds [the New Science]: the definition of myth as 'true narration' (vera narratio)" (p.
However, in the course of his exposition, it is not only the definition of myth as true narration that he explores, but the idea of truth in the *New Science* in general. In each chapter, like a part of a symphony, he explores, tests, develops, and compares the idea of truth in relation to past and present ideas about science, civilization, mythology, and history, concluding with Vico’s notion of truth—a notion with which Mali advances the discussion to the following chapter.

Mali is quite justified in making the idea of truth the leitmotif of his book. Vico invokes the concept in the most celebrated and often quoted passage in the *New Science*:

> But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all questions: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that is principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows: and they should have neglected the study of world of nations, or civil world, which, since men made it, men could come to know. [*New Science, 331*]

In this passage, Mali contends, the truth to which Vico refers is “about how men had made their civil world and why, therefore, men could come to know it” (p. 13). He correctly perceives that Vico attributes to the process of popular transmission of folk tradition (“vulgar tradition”) a capacity to discern truth from falsehood and to create a narration that it is true by its virtue of being popularly created. The phrase “public ground of truth” is crucial in deciphering the folkloristic implications of Vico’s thought. Mali suggests that this phrase—“publici motivi del vero”—indicates what

Vico regards as the main force in the social construction of reality, to wit, the popular impressions and interpretations of reality which, being the essential lessons of the collective-historical experience, are continuously recorded, reassessed, reaffirmed and transmitted by the common people in such “vulgar transitions” as linguistic phrases, myths, popular rituals and plays, and so on. Such popular traditions are maintained because they embody and convey to the members of the community important messages, symbolic and practical codes of behaviour: they teach them, in fact, what it means to be a member in a community. (p. 225–226)

But Vico approaches the idea of truth from a different perspective when he discusses it in relation to scientific inquiry and formulations. The truthfulness of traditions is distinct from the scientific capabilities of learning something true about them. Vico, Mali argues, objected to the physico-geometrical science of Descartes, considering its absolutist claims for truth not only immodest but also, in the final analysis, merely human truths. The Newtonian approach that involved observation and experimenta-
since it admitted its tentativeness, limiting its obtained knowledge to certainty rather than dogmatic truth. But in contrast with both scientific approaches, Vico proposed that by shifting the scientific inquiry from nature to humanity it is possible to discover the many different truths of people, finding them in human ideas, customs, and institutions. Yet the validity of such a science of humanity still requires “universal and eternal principles, such as every science must have” (p. 19; *New Science*, 332). It would be possible for Vico to formulate such universal principles only if he can discern some universals in human society. Once again, he finds them in the area that has later become the core staple of folklore research, namely language, and particularly proverbs. Vico states:

> There must in the nature of human institutions be a mental language common to all nations [*una lingua mentale comune a tutte i nation*], which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects. A proof of this is afforded by proverbs or maxims of vulgar wisdom, in which substantially the same meanings find as many diverse expressions as there are nations ancient and modern. This common mental language is proper to our science, by whose light linguistic scholars will be enable to construct a mental vocabulary common to all the various articulate languages living and dead. [p. 72; *New Science*, 161-162]

In addition to the “common mental language” considered the fundamental universal traits of human society, the features that distinguish man from beast, are religion, marriage, and burial of the dead. These are the distinctive marks of the civil world. Mali explores the theological difficulties that face Vico when he assumes the religiosity of “gentile nations” that have existed beyond the historical circles of revealed religions. Vico's unique solution positions folklore at the center of the civilizing process. The poetic narration or the mythopoetic creativity transformed humanity from its natural to civilized state. Narration does not only recount the past; it also sets models for ideal behavior.

In such fashion the first men of the gentile nations, children of nascent mankind, created things according to their own ideas. But this creation was infinitely different from that of God. For God, in his purest intelligence, knows things, and by knowing them, creates them, but they, in their robust ignorance, did it by virtue of a wholly corporeal imagination. And because it was quite corporeal, they did it witty marvelous sublimity; a sublimity such and so great that it excessively perturbed the very persons who by imagining did the creating, for which they were called “poets,” which is Greek for “creators.” Now this is the three-fold labor of great poetry: (1) to invent sublime fables suited to popular understanding, (2) to perturb to excess, with a view to the end proposed: (3) to teach the vulgar to act virtuously, as the poets have taught themselves. [*New Science*, 376]

Vico's natural poets are both self taught and teachers of the vulgar. He places, as Mali points out (pp. 74–135, esp. 110), the mythopoetic creativity at the center of the civilizing process through which those nations that were not privileged by divine revelation emerged from barbarism to humanity. Vico considers this process to be “spontaneous, anonymous, collective, and poetic” (p. 80), singling out those aspects that have later been recognized among the basic attributes of folklore (Ben-Amos 1983).

Examined in the context of the 18th-century world of ideas, Mali demonstrates that Vico’s proposition to regard myth as a true narration is not merely a reversal of meaning associated with the concept since the classical period, but a multidimensional “rehabilitation,” establishing the veracity of myth on the basis of its relation to history, society, language, and thought. Such a conception of myth requires primarily its literal rather than allegorical interpretation. Myth is not an attempt to conceal but to reveal meaning. It is an artistic conceit into which interpreters read their own real meaning, but it has its own original meaning of truth that stems from its poetic creation. “The theological poets—were themselves heroes and sang true and austere fables” (*New Science*, 905). Their direct involvement in the events that were the subject of their narration enabled them to convey truth in their poems. The corruption of truth is a by-
product of the historical transmission process and not inherent in poetic creativity.

But the very process that removes mythic poetry from its historical truth weights it with another truth that is perhaps of even greater value. The mythic poetry represents the national truth of the people who sing and transmit it from generation to generation, and shape the poetry in their own image. The “discovery,” Vico’s term for his identification, of Greece as the true Homer—a central idea in Vico’s New Science—implies also that the true Greece is to be found in the Homeric epic. The relationship of identity between a people and their epic has become possible only when myth is conceived as a true narration. Vico, extending the same approach to class, regarded Aesop as a poetic character who represents and embodies the sentiment of slave and plebeian society (New Science, 91, 424–426). Origins, in Vico’s principles of science, have an explanatory power, and hence the discovery of the origination of myth and fables is a discovery of their true nature and social identity. He substitutes society, either class or nation, as the reference in his allegorical interpretation of mythopoiesis, but in doing so he does not neglect the language of myth. On the contrary, he emphasizes that myth has its own poetic language and its own poetic logic, and in doing so, Mali points out, he eliminates the dichotomy between myth (and poetry) and logic, insisting on deciphering the poetic logic of myth through the examination of its rhetorical principles. Vico’s emphasis on the importance of poetic language and logic, on the formal aspects of myths, does not sway him into neglecting their content. Mali points out that, contra the Enlightenment voices that were critical of tradition, Vico contended that “‘vulgar traditions’ [i.e. folk traditions] are indispensable to all societies, as well as to those who study them, because it is always in and through such collective patterns of thought that people construe their social reality” (p. 216).

In the final analysis, my review is an interpretation of an interpretation—an interpretation geared toward goals never intended nor pursued yet thoroughly achieved by Joseph Mali. In his quest for the discovery of the true Vico, he found the discipline of folklore. He became an eloquent, sophisticated, and erudite explorer of its nascent ideas as they emerged within Western thought and offered us a book that should be a part of our scholarly canon.

Note

Following the conventions of current Vichian scholarship, throughout this review references to the New Science are to paragraph number.

References Cited


