

PREDICATION AND THE CASE OF THE SLIDING UNIVERSAL

Even Ludwig Wittgenstein, patron saint of Logical Positivism, hallowed the idea of “family resemblances” which is the logical bottom of *semblance*, the form of universality that connects set theory with neurophysiology.¹ This polythetic, or “sliding” universality allows for difference while retaining the notion of membership — identity that one could say is maintained *via* a “code,” which can be interpreted as a pledge or oath or, alternatively, as a password allowing *territorial movement*.

We would demand this congeries of functionalities in any case, were we to account for the phenomenon of predication fully — a demand that led Giambattista Vico to thematize for the first time three fully operational human mentalities (mythic, heroic, human) that diachronically gave rise to three “ages” of cultural development or, synchronically, constituted the phenomenological movement from what Ernst Cassirer would later call the “expressive function” to “representational function,” to the “abstraction function.” These three levels of predication/universalization were adopted by the archaeologist Walter Fairservis, as essential to the correct identification of artifacts, not just as to historical sequence but functional placement with the cultural complex. To sum up the problem, the *magic-archaic* may be contemporary, although in a barely recognizable form, within the comparatively modern *secular*. The three forms of universals not only can exist side by side, but their functionality is structurally and phenomenally linked.

Vico’s discovery may be regarded as the first formal philosophical version of what had been recognized in other terms, from the Greek idea of *tipos* and *topos* to the idea of idea itself in Plato’s theory of forms. Vico possibly formed his insights around the metaphor of *animus* and *anima*, the Stoic conception of a two-part soul, where *animus* played the part of an invasive division/difference, an *ingenium* invigorating natural substance in the same way a plant might be germinated. This was a quasi-sexual idea of the universal, and later Jacques Lacan would provide the means for seeing “just how sexual,” by developing a theory of sexuation based on enumeration and partiality — doomed, perhaps, to be forever

¹ Semblance and contiguity were coupled and contrasted as the bases of contrasting styles of meaning formation, after evidence of brain-damaged victims of World War I were extensively analyzed and compared. These studies were the grounds of modern linguistics, especially of Jakobson, whose distinction of metaphor and metonymy invited the characterization of a “poetic” *versus* a “rational” energy within language and thought. This was an unfortunate correlation in that it aestheticized metaphor’s essentially analogical, and hence logical, nature and rationalized metonymy’s relation to distance and negation effects, which establish it as the modality most closely related to the unconscious. Jakobson eventually recanted, but not before linguistics — as well as popular psychology and many other human sciences — stratified social and neurological functions by separating “creative” and “rational” modalities (cf. the “left-brain/right-brain hypothesis”). While it is impossible to repair the damage of this, the original correlation to semblance relationships, where identity is established polythetically rather than determinatively, is appropriate to metonymy’s capability for resonance. Contiguity, more often associated with rationality, is implicit in metaphor’s strategies of cross-mapping, evident in the case of allegory. Both functions interrelate, making any clear separation of powers both impossible and misleading. Vico, in grouping metonymy and metaphor proper together under the heading of “metaphor” attempted to show this interrelationship.

misunderstood except by those such as Nicole Loraux who returned the issues of sexuation to matters of civic formation.

Vico's three principal styles of predication began with — and he leaves no doubt about this — *reversed* predication.² In his "fable" of cultural origins, the first humans wander as feral beings in thick forests, able to communicate possibly but not yet capable of the kinds of stable culture based on genealogy — i.e. the stabilization of the function of the *name* (cf. "totem"). At some point, human fear of thunder is pushed to an extreme in a moment of fright of loud thunder, and thunder as a *word* in the full poetic sense is realized collectively and related to other signs given by the sky; clearings are made in the forest, to better witness these signs and to offer space to the rituals necessitated by their correct reception and interpretation. Admission to these clearings — "sites of exception" in their first human appearance — were indistinguishable from membership in the cultural group. Words, which before may have only designated objects, actions, and intentions, now added the functionality of the password, a magic supplement related to entry into the exceptional space.

The "first" form of universality thus was, probably, not literally the first means of speech used to designate things; it was the first *human* speech, which was from this new beginning a "half-speech," partly representational-conventional and partly magical-poetic (for lack of better words), a quality captured sympathetically by James Joyce's use of four versions of this first word of the thunder in *Finnegans Wake*. Phonetically, Joyce constructs thunder-words that are the basis of all languages, a kind of "kit" of sound-parts for making multiple languages out of a single Adamic speech. As the thunder-word is secularized, the poetic component continues to resist. It retains its function as a password; it is "structurally half" in that it is forever incapable of directly designating in the scientific-positivistic sense of set membership. As a set, the poetic universal's "instances" would equate to Lacan's idea of the feminine "not-all." In his frequently misunderstood theory of gendering, woman is "not-all" — never fully subject to the laws of symbolic castration — and there are "no exceptions" to this rule. The enigma of sexuation is somewhat functional itself. It leads, according to Nicole Loraux, to the rituals and politics of civic formation, which cannot be simplified as the results of political-sexual dominance. Sexuation is from the beginning a matter of language, but not just language as the essence of the Lacanian Symbolic but language as a system capable of developing within itself elements of resistance — durable resistance — that Mladen Dolar would successfully locate within the idea of the "acousmatic": originally a term designating the "off-stage voice" used in cinema but, as Dolar argues, central to the idea of voice, as the Lacanian "partial object."

One imagines introducing Lacan to Vico, but this is a complicated and unfinished story. Lacan knew something about Vico, mainly through Joyce, but did not have the opportunity to

² Part of the reversal has to do with the first humans, unable to see their own natures, imagine nature as something like them — i.e. violent, passionate, impulsive, arbitrary. By creating a nature that was essentially a mirror, they could externalize and eventually modify this extreme personality.

realize parallels between his and Vico's theories of language. Vico scholars have not realized the potential benefits of such a linkage, and Lacan scholars have only in a few instances, and typically through the Joyce connection, acknowledged Vico's significance or promise. This is a case of "never missing an opportunity to miss an opportunity," ironic and even anguishing in consideration of what is at stake: i.e. nothing less than a connection of the idea of "sliding universals" (canonized as a system of three functions by Vico and Cassirer) with the idea of predication and sexuation related to *passage* and *territorialization*, which Lacan would refer to topology in contrast to projective geometry. The payoff would be enormous. Geography could articulate a "horizontal atlas" capable of assimilating connectivity-contiguity issues with questions of semblance — the two "neural" categories that were converted in the 1920s and 30s to the functions of metonymy and metaphor, respectively. Psychologists and linguists could realize the "resistances" within language that Freud had connected to the "signalizing" functions of the unconscious. Philosophers elsewhere could move away from reductive ideas of the universal towards a restoration of ideas that, since the ancient Greeks, were already and always present in the notions of *tipos*, *topos*, and *idea*.

Perhaps the idea of "payoff" is wrong. There is the likelihood that too much has already been invested in the "vertical atlas," so to speak — the reifications of an empiricism based on Newtonian models of power and the motions of isolated objects; billiard-ball models sophisticated to the point where the "causal chain" has been allowed sufficient exceptions to work as pure ideology, as in the case of *Empire*. Whatever the reason, it is unlikely that the remaining distance between Lacan and Vico will be covered; unlikely that the case for linking three-part universals with reversed predication and Lacanian partial objects ever adequately assimilated in "social science style" models of subjectivity. This remaining distance ironically takes on the functions and attributes of the quality that makes university essentially a sliding function; the resistance that, within phonemics, preserves the acousmatic voice; the resistance that, within the political, forever retains membership to the unconscious.

The fact that language forever and always permeates territory, and *vice versa*, is the theoretical gap between the approach focusing on reversed predication and other approaches. The cost of crossing, to say nothing of closing, this gap must be considered in terms of the project at hand.