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# Genealogies and Analogies of 'Culture' in the History of Cultural Translation – on Boturini's Translation of Tlaloc and Vico in *Idea of a New General History of Northern America*

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> If the ideas and the basic terminology of Aristotle or the Stoics or Pascal or Newton or Hume or Kant did not possess a capacity for independent life, for surviving translation, and indeed, transplantation, not without at times, some change of meaning, into the language of very disparate cultures, long after their own worlds had passed away, they would by now, at best have found an honourable resting-place beside the writings of the Aristotelians of Padua or Christian Wolff, major influences in their day, in some museum of historical antiquities. (Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, 2002: 8)

This chapter explores the cultural history of the translation of Giambattista Vico's 'first civil metaphor' to New Spain and Spain. Vico, a Neapolitan teacher of rhetoric, published three versions of his *Scienza Nuova* during his lifetime (in 1725, 1730 and 1744). The later history of its reception, not least the so-called discovery of Vico beginning with Jules Michelet in the nineteenth century, has seen his new science as a harbinger of historicism and modern cultural anthropology. Along with the text in which it appears, the first civil metaphor thus forms part of the canon of the human sciences. What role did the metaphor have in his *Scienza Nuova?* And how was it translated to the New World?

According to the Bible, after the Deluge men had been dispersed all over the earth. Vico asserted that they had forgotten how to live in society during their lawless wanderings. This lawless state of affairs, however, ended with the appearance of Jove, who, communicating angrily with lightning and

thunder, drew men back into civil life. Vico referred to this event as 'that first civil metaphor in which Jove, identified with the Sky, would write his laws in lightning and promulgate them in thunder' ([1725] 2002: §411).[1] I am interested in how this metaphor was used to frame and interpret the Mexican deity Tlaloc in a historical work published in Madrid in 1746. The author's name was Lorenzo Boturini Benaduci, a Milanese traveller who, after his stay in New Spain, published the work entitled *Idea de una nueva historia general de America septentrional*[2] (*Idea of a New General History of Northern America*; hereafter *Idea*). Boturini based this 'new history' upon a collection of manuscripts he had assembled in New Spain, which he called *museo historico indiano* (Indian historical museum). According to John B. Glass, Boturini's *museo* was 'the most important [. . .] collection for Mexican Ethnohistory ever assembled' (1975: 473). Unfortunately for Boturini, the authorities in New Spain confiscated his collection. The official reason was that the Milanese traveller not only had collected funds for the coronation of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, but he entered the territory without the required permission from the Council of the Indies. For this reason Boturini was incarcerated, and eventually expelled and sent to Spain. There he presented his *Idea* to the Council of the Indies, and in December 1745 the Council licensed the publication of the work.[3]

In addition to the part Boturini played in the history of Mesoamerican antiquarianism and the historiography of the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, he also fulfilled a remarkable role in the history of the early reception of Vico's *New Science* (hereafter *NS*). In fact, the *Idea* can be considered the first attempt to adapt the 'universal' and 'ideal' history of the *NS* to the history of a particular 'culture'. However, Boturini's use of Vico was not wholly felicitous in eighteen-century Spain. He quoted extensively from Vico, but never identified the Neapolitan author as his source; consequently he was accused both of 'translating' the *NS* and of 'accommodating' Vico's explanation of Greek fables to Mesoamerican mythology.

Even if Boturini signals that his is a '*new* history', and thus promises – through a performative speech act inscribed in the title – a break with prior

1 References to the *Scienza Nuova* are to paragraphs, not pages.

2 Boturini's spelling is awkward. He uses tildes in unexpected places and omits them in those places where we would expect them. Here, and in the following citations from Boturini, I transcribe his text with the original spelling intact. The translations of Boturini are mine.

3 José Torres Revello published documents pertaining to the Boturini case in Argentina in 1933. These were republished in Mexico in 1936 (Torres Revello, 1936).

Spanish historiography of the Indies, he must also relate the announced novelty to his target culture, that is, to previous Spanish knowledge of the subject. The so-called 'spiritual conquest' of the Americas was already accompanied by extensive efforts by the religious orders to describe the language and customs of the natives. But although such friars as Bernardino de Sahagún, José de Acosta and Bartolomé de Las Casas have been called the 'fathers of anthropology', the purpose of the knowledge produced was manifestly the conversion of the natives. This distinguishes missionary ethnography from modern ethnography written according to anthropocentric criteria with the intention of grasping the 'native's point of view'.[4]

Boturini had to adapt to his Spanish target culture not least because the *Idea* was written with a clear objective in mind; that is, to obtain the position of 'Royal Chronicler in New Spain' and regain control over the confiscated museum. This early 'translation' of Vico – performed by a Milanese foreigner in Spain – makes Boturini's case a privileged example in what one could call the cultural history of cultural translation. *Idea* articulates two genealogies of 'cultural' thought from what Peter Burke has called the period 'before the concept of culture came into general use' (1997: 2). How does Boturini, a marginal figure from the historical archive, incorporate a metaphor from the text of one of the canonised voices of the human sciences in his proposition for a new history of *America septentrional*? By answering this question, I also intend to approach some aspects of the broader issue of how 'cultures' were translated before the term came into general use, in order to address questions of human difference and sameness.

One particular Vico reception has seen the Neapolitan teacher of rhetoric as the founding father of the modern human sciences. Donald P. Verene (2002) dates the current interest in Vico on the Anglo-American scene back to Isaiah Berlin's *Vico and Herder*.[5] Berlin claimed that 'Vico is the true father of the modern concept of culture and of what one might call cultural pluralism, according to which each authentic culture has its own unique vision, its own scale of values' (1990: 59–60). Many have heavily contested this casting of Vico in the role of precursor (see, for instance, Lilla, 1993). Nevertheless, the identification of where the break with 'tradition' occurs in Vico still amounts to what one could call the historico-narrative premise of a particular 'Vico discourse', almost obsessed with the question of the newness of the *NS* (see Said, 1975; White, 1976).[6] This historical narrative has had a strong

4 For more information, see Ødemark (2004).

5 Now republished as *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (Berlin, 2002).

6 See, for instance, Anthony Grafton, who recently applied this topology in his introduction to the Penguin translation of the *NS*: 'Vico bestrides the modern

impact on the (rather negligible) reception of Boturini's *Idea* – even from a decolonial scholar such as Walter Mignolo. He sees Boturini's *Idea* as the first interpretation of Amerindian scripts that breaks with the conceptual grid that governed previous understandings of non-alphabetic Amerindian writing. As such, it represents an escape from the 'trap of the Renaissance celebration of alphabetic writing'. According to Mignolo, this was the 'trap' that friars had fallen into (1995: 148). Mignolo emphasises Vico's influence in his account of this event in the historiography of Mesoamerican script:

> Vico introduced, nevertheless, a new way of looking at the history of writing and the writing of history. The happy coincidence that Boturini read Vico and went to Mexico to see in Mexican writing what missionaries of the first century failed to see: the Amerindian's magnificent and exemplary (to paraphrase his own [Boturini's] expressions) ways of writing history, which could be positively compared – according to Boturini – with the most celebrated histories written anywhere in the world. (1995: 149)

Here Vico's theory in the *NS* becomes the 'cause' of the elimination of an interpretative 'failure', while Boturini's work on Mesoamerican culture is the practical effect.

Berlin based his claims of Vico's paternity to 'culture' upon the Neapolitan's use of the so-called *verum/factum* principle, an epistemological precept according to which only makers can have true knowledge of objects: to make is to know (the truth of) the object constructed. In his early book *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, Vico ([1710] 1988) restricts the knowledge of

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social sciences and humanities like a colossus. Historians, anthropologists and philosophers around the world agree in seeing his *New Science* as a work of dazzling prescience. Vico argued systematically that the understanding of a past society – even of an earlier period in the history of one's own society – was a demanding, if rewarding, intellectual task. The modern reader opening a work by Homer or Livy had to realize that it did not describe individuals like himself, men and women whose experience, feelings and ideas would be immediately recognizable. Only by mastering the general laws of social and cultural evolution that Vico himself had formulated could one avoid committing basic errors. Vico's contemporaries envisioned the ancient Greeks and Romans as robed sages moving decorously down perfect colonnades. In fact, they had been brutal primitive warriors' (Grafton, 1999: xi and 2001: 259). Here a certain 'heterology of the past', in its turn based upon an awareness of historical anachronism, is singled out as Vico's contribution. A scrutiny of the Vico literature makes one rather uncertain of what the 'agreement' between 'historians, anthropologists and philosophers' is about.

nature to God (since he made it), while the knowledge of human creations is still open for human cognition. Thus, a modern distinction between the fields of the natural and the human sciences appears to be prefigured here – at least when it comes to the point of *where* the boundaries between nature and culture are to be drawn, and the constructivist criteria for drawing them. This epistemological principle from *Ancient Wisdom* is rephrased in what appears to be an anthropological key in the later *NS*:

> 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 question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but 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 that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations, or civil world, which, since men made it, men could come to know. (Vico, [1744] 1968: §331)

According to Berlin, it was precisely in the 'leap' between the two texts that Vico founded a conceptual field for the study of 'culture'. In the *NS*, 'the *verum/factum* formula could be applied to human history conceived in its widest sense, to all that men have done and made and suffered' (2002: 141). Here *il mondo civile* appears to be a pure product of a human art of making. Moreover, it would seem to follow that other human subjects who share this anthropological potential for making could also understand the social arrangements of other humans. The ultimate result of this transposition, claims Berlin, was the discovery of 'the very conception of culture as a category of historical thought, and indeed of thought in general' (2002: 141). However, 'civil society' is also founded upon a rhetorical art. This is so because 'civil society' as a product of human *poiesis* has its origin in what Vico calls the 'first civil metaphor', the metaphor Boturini applies in interpreting Tlaloc.

Below, I shall use Boturini's translation of Vico's first civil metaphor to approach some aspects of the relation between early modern, theocentric and emergent anthropocentric forms of cultural investigation. But before doing so, I shall situate my subject matter within the broader theoretical field of translation; first, by taking into account Homi K. Bhabha's theory on translation and secondly, by presenting a primal scene of cultural translation taken from the work of the anthropologist Roy Wagner.

How should we analyse Boturini's translation of Vico's first civil metaphor? In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha states that

> it is not adequate simply to become aware of the semiotic systems that produce the signs of culture and their dissemination. Much more significantly, we are faced with the challenge of reading into the present of a specific cultural performance, the traces of all those diverse disciplinary discourses and institutions of knowledge that constitute the condition and context of culture. [. . .] Such a critical process requires a cultural temporality that is both disjunctive and capable of articulating, in Lévi-Strauss words, 'forms of activity which are both at once ours and other'. (1994: 163)

Thus, any cultural performance (like our translated metaphor) should not be reduced to the effect of a unified and underlying semiotic system that functions as a code and/or 'cause'. Rather, one has to investigate all the 'traces' that impinge upon it. Bhabha defines these as follows: 'I use the word ''traces'' to suggest a particular kind of interdisciplinary discursive transformation that the analytic of cultural difference demands. To enter into the interdisciplinarity of cultural texts means that we cannot contextualise the emergent cultural form by locating it in terms of some pre-given discursive causality or origin' (1994: 163). This approach liberates us from the model of influence (still having an impact on Mignolo's account of a break with the tradition of the friars) and from seeing Boturini's translation of Vico as an American appendix to the text of the 'strong poet' from Naples. On the contrary, any given cultural performance should be understood as overdetermined, as responding to and incorporating signs from various centres of culture. This also makes it possible to give agency to Boturini the 'translator', and (eventually) to the Mesoamerican material he articulates through Vico's theories. But in the case of Boturini's translation and the citation of Vico's first civil metaphor, the metaphor, and the concept of culture itself – in its historical temporality – is one of the disciplinary and institutional 'traces' in play. Thus, the very concept that demarcates the field of investigation is inevitably implicated in the analysis. How are we to meet the 'challenge' in this case? To accomplish this task, albeit partially, we have to tackle the question of the historical constitution and temporality of culture – precisely the conceptual space that Bhabha uses to qualify 'temporality' and 'performance'. In addition, one should also tackle the issue of what it implies to inscribe the relation between 'us' and 'them' as sameness and difference in terms of a *cultural* relation ultimately grounded in the unconscious (the meeting place of 'forms of activity which are both at once ours and other'). To situate the relation of self and other in the unconscious is after all a strategy with a long theological prehistory.[7] What is 'culture's' historical location at a

7 See, for example, Asad (1986, 1993) and Argyrou (2002).

level between the surface of the text and the registers of the archaic and the unconscious? Is 'culture' translatable across time and space?

As I have already mentioned, in order to approach this more extended problem, I shall discuss what might be called a primal scene of cultural translation found in Wagner's book, *The Invention of Culture* (1981). Wagner writes that a possible translation of 'culture' in Melanesian languages is the term *kago* (the pidgin word that has become a part of the terminology of religious and cultural studies in a term spelled slightly differently, 'cargo cult').[8] The author performs his translation of 'culture' in the following way:

> If we call such phenomena 'cargo cults', then anthropology should perhaps be called a 'culture cult', for the Melanesian 'kago' is very much the interpretive counterpart of our word 'culture'. The words are [. . .] 'mirror images' of each other, in the sense that we look at the natives' cargo, their techniques and artefacts and call it culture, whereas they look at our culture and call it 'cargo'. These are analogic usages. (1981: 31)

This translation underlines Wagner's argument that 'culture' belongs (and this comes as no surprise) to our culture. It is a sobriquet that 'we' use to classify and explain the otherness of 'others'.[9] Here then 'culture' is made relative to a certain cultural and conceptual history. On the one hand, this scene of cultural translation obviously conjures up a whole range of familiar paradoxes of relativism. On the other hand, in Wagner's translation, the concept – almost immediately after the apparent suspension of 'cultural authority' – is assigned a secure place in the tribunal of experience, as Wagner's analogy of culture clearly presupposes that the experience of collective human difference is registered at some kind of *border*. Borders must exist, must have a real presence in the experience of the human world. It is actually only at such borders that the Melanesian *kago* can function as a dynamic or pragmatic equivalent to 'culture', as a way of naming a relation to 'others' who are felt to be different (but still somehow the 'same'). It is here, then, at

8 The *Penguin Dictionary of Religion* defines the term 'cargo cult' as follows: 'The name given to [. . .] movements occurring primarily [. . .] in Melanesia, expecting a new order of equality with whites and human fulfilment to be achieved supernaturally, and symbolized by the arrival of a cargo of Western-type goods' (Hinnels, 1984: 76).

9 'The study of culture is culture, and an anthropology that wishes to be aware, and to develop its sense of relative objectivity, must come to terms with this fact. The study of culture is in fact our culture; it operates through our forms, creates in our terms, and borrows our words' (Wagner, 1981: 16).

this border that culture begins to present 'itself' as difference in the same. We are witness here to an encounter between two different terms (*kago*, culture) pointing towards what we must take to be the *same* border from different linguistic vantage points.

If 'culture' is translated into *kago*, and in a certain sense 'vanishes' cross-culturally, this last term is also dissolved into 'cult'. Thus, we also have a 'vanishing point' in historical time. It is the term 'cult' that functions as the *tertium comparationis*, and which establishes a linguistic location where 'we' can be compared to 'them' ('culture cult' [i.e. anthropology] vs. 'cargo cult'). The term 'cult', historically derived from *cultu*s – a Latin term bearing the age-old traces of serving as a mark for religious difference, and a precursor of 'culture' itself – , thus turns out to be a prerequisite for Wagner's staging of this particular scene of cultural translation. But if 'cult' in this way functions as the middle term, it also means that the boundary, in the last instance, is wholly contained within the history of the language of the 'culture cult' – anthropology.

Some salient semantic aspects of this vanishing point could be captured by invoking the linguistic concept of collocation (see Catford, 1967: 101).[10] Even if *kago* and 'culture' in certain respects 'mirror each other', the terms involved are undoubtedly embedded in different languages with different semantic histories where they collocate with a range of different words and meanings. In addition, they are also related to different pragmatics, to different ritual practices and intentions (in the cargo cult, preparing for the dead ancestors' return – the latter will come with valued Western goods as a gift to the living;[11] in the culture cult, writing anthropological literature to further academic knowledge – and careers). I shall approach the translation of the first civil metaphor from these two angles. I shall be concerned with traces

10 In the final chapter of *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, in a section devoted to 'The limits of translatability', John C. Catford explains cultural untranslatability in purely linguistic terms: 'To talk of ''cultural untranslatability'' may be just another way of talking about collocational untranslatability: the impossibility of finding an equivalent collocation in the T[arget] L[anguage]. And this would be a type of linguistic untranslatability. We might define collocational untranslatability thus: untranslatability arising from the fact that any possible TL near-equivalence of a given S[ource] L[language] lexical item has a low probability of collocation with TL equivalents of items in the SL text which collocate normally with the given SL item' (1967: 101).

11 See, for instance, the practices described in the *Penguin Dictionary of Religion*: 'Wharves, airstrips, and warehouses may be built, and to hasten the event new rituals and behaviour replace the traditional customs and economy' (Hinnels, 1984: 76). Thus, the living create the infrastructure that will allow the dead ancestors to come back to life with a surplus of valued Western goods.

of a theological discourse that 'still' influences Vico's 'cultural' investigation, and a pragmatics of collecting that makes Boturini depart from Vico's *NS*.

The full title of Boturini's *Idea* is: *Idea de una nueva historia general de America septentrional fundada sobre material copioso de Figuras, Symbolos, Caractères y Geroglificos, Cantares y Manuscritos de Autores Indios ultimamente descubiertos* (*Idea of a New General History of Northern America founded upon copious material of figures, symbols, characters and hieroglyphs, songs and manuscripts by Indian Authors recently discovered*). Boturini's *museo historico indiano* was to serve as the 'foundation' for the history proposed in *Idea*, and the 'copious material' consisted of the sources 'recently discovered' by Boturini himself during his stay in New Spain. The second part of the publication consisted of a catalogue of the *museo*, and on the title page of this section, Boturini writes that 'el siguiente Tesoro Literario [. . .] puede servir para ordenar, y escribir la historia general de aquel Nuevo Mundo, fundado en Monumentos indisputables de los mismos Indios' (the following Literary Treasure [. . .] can serve to organise and write the general history of the New World, based upon the Indians' own indisputable Monuments) (Boturini, 1746: np). In addition to being referred to as a particular 'cultural' and 'racial' authorship (*manuscritos de autores indios* [manuscripts of Indian authors]), these authentic 'monuments' are presented as a personal possession. This can be understood from the title page of the catalogue:

> Catalogo del museo historico indiano del Cavallero Lorenzo Boturini Benaduci, Señor de la Torre y de Hono, Quien llegó a la Nueva España por Febrero del año 1736. y à porfiadas diligencias, è inmensos gastos de su bolsa juntò, en diferentes Provincias, el siguiente Tesoro Literario. (Boturini, 1746: np)

> Catalogue of the Indian historical museum of the gentleman Lorenzo Boturini Benaduci, Lord of Torre and of Hono, who arrived in New Spain in February of the year 1736, and with persistent efforts, and immense expenses from his own purse, gathered, in different provinces, the following literary treasure.

In this paratextual space, at the border between *Idea* and the *Catalogo*, Boturini frames 'his' collection in an economic idiom; it has been made a possession as a result of hard work accompanied by huge monetary expenses. In the introduction to the catalogue section (immediately after the title page), Boturini, in the same idiom, claims that the collection is his only 'estate' (*hacienda*) in New Spain. Moreover, this literary *hacienda* is so valuable that he is unwilling to exchange it for other, more mundane treasures. If the museum is a personal possession, and as such part of a 'personal economy', it has also

entered an altogether different economic sphere: 'Esta es la unica Hacienda, que tengo en Indias, y tan preciosa, que no la trocàra por oro, y plata, por diamantes, y perlas' (This is the only estate I have in the Indies, and [is] so precious that I will not exchange it for gold and silver, for diamonds and pearls) (1746: np). Thus, the collection is 'so precious' that it cannot be traded back into the economy within which it was in play when it was established.

Taking the disciplinary traces of practical antiquarianism and a certain economy of collecting seriously would have consequences for the reading of *Idea* – not least with respect to its assessment of the script of native culture. As Mignolo has observed, Boturini praised Mesoamerican script for its 'figures, symbols, characters and hieroglyphs, which envelop a sea of erudition', and eulogised Mesoamerican history as 'the most eloquent of all that to this day has been discovered' (Mignolo, 1995: 149–150, see Boturini, 1746: 2). However, Boturini's assessments of the history and script of the 'other' could also be read in relation to the 'literary treasure' which the collector claims as his 'only *hacienda*'. Every statement regarding Mesoamerican script and history in Boturini's text can be seen as part of a system of split references. By this I mean that statements on the worth of Mesoamerican culture also implicate the value of Boturini's 'own' museum, a copious collection of sources on the history of *America septentrional*. Consequently, statements on the 'culture of the other' would also refer back to the author/collector. In between the 'self' and the 'other' there emerges the mediatory space of the *museo historico indiano*. On the one hand, this is a product of 'other' producers (*autores indios*), but on the other, it also forms part of the 'hacienda economy' of the collector. In this way, the text of the *Idea*, the museum and the historical referent represented in the historical narration – in its turn 'founded' upon the sources gathered in the museum – , can be seen as forming a 'unit' of cultural production. Inside this unit, we find a feedback loop where the enunciator, as collector/historian, ultimately is implicated in the statements referring to his historical referent, namely Mesoamerican culture. How do the traces of the institutional and disciplinary practice of collecting and antiquarianism relate to Boturini's translation of Vico's first civil metaphor – the metaphor that creates 'culture', or perhaps something analogous in the period 'before the concept of culture came into general use'?

Boturini's misfortunes were not to end in New Spain. In April 1745, he presented *Idea* to the Council of the Indies, which first responded positively to his historical project (Cañizares-Esguerra, 2001: 137). It appointed its *fiscal* for New Spain, José Borull, to review the work and he delivered a report that judged *Idea* very favourably. Borull recommended that Boturini should be appointed *escritor general de la Nueva España* (general writer of New Spain), that the collection should be returned to him and that he should be given the necessary money to go to New Spain and assume his newly awarded

office (Cañizares-Esguerra, 2001: 140). In December 1745, in accordance with Borull's recommendations, the Council approved the publication of *Idea*, and appointed Boturini royal chronicler of New Spain. A few months later, however, the council changed its mind and Antonio López (a *nahua* interpreter working for the *audiencia* in New Spain who had made the first inventory of the Boturini collection) was assigned the task of establishing an academy of history in New Spain (Cañizares-Esguerra, 2001: 140). During this time, people in the circles around the Royal Library in Madrid had levelled certain accusations at Boturini. In July 1746, the Jesuit and courtier Andrés Marcos Buriell wrote that

> ahora se publica que en la obra es mero traductor de Juan Bautista Vico, napolitano, que el año de 25 de este siglo imprimió una idea de una ciencia y Derecho natural y de Gentes contra Grocio, Puffendorf [*sic*] y Seldeno, al qual tengo aquí pero no he podido leer. (Andrés Marcos Buriell to Gregorio Mayans 1746-IV-30. Carta nr. 75, in Mayans y Siscar, 2002)

> now it is divulged that in the work he is merely translating Juan Bautista Vico, a Neapolitan who in the 25th year of this century printed an idea of a science and natural Law and of Nations against Grotius, Pufendorf and Selden, which I have here, but have not been able to read. (My translation)

As mentioned above, it is true that Boturini never explicitly named Vico in his *Idea*. In fact, the closest he comes to identifying the Neapolitan author in *Idea* is in a section where he discusses the Mesoamerican god Tlaloc. It is precisely here that Boturini cites Vico's first civil metaphor:

> Y aunque los Indios de la segunda y tercera Edad tuvieron à este Idolo [Tlaloc] por Dios de la lluvia, no obstante, los de la primera le reverenciaron como Pregonero de la Providencia, pensando que ella escribia las leyes con los rayos, y las publicaba con los truenos, que es lo mismo, que de Júpiter dixo con elegante metafora un Poeta Italiano.
>
> *Ne la primera etade*
>
> *Gli Eroi leggevan le leggi in petto a Giove.*

(Boturini, 1746: 13; italics in the original)

> And even if the Indians of the second and third age held this idol [Tlaloc] as the God of Rain, those of the first nevertheless revered him as the promulgator of Providence, thinking that she wrote the laws with lightning and published them with thunder – the same was said of Jove in an elegant metaphor by an Italian poet.

*Ne la primera etade*

*Gli Eroi leggevan le leggi in petto a Giove*.

The 'elegant metaphor' appears in a part of the text where Boturini describes the thirteen gods of the *Mexica* pantheon. The paragraph ends with a quote from an 'Italian poet' – Vico. Vico himself never treated the Mesoamerican deities explicitly, but in terms of the general system of his 'ideal, eternal history', every gentile nation has a Jove. After the deluge, men had been dispersed all over the earth and during their wanderings had forgotten how to live in society. The appearance of Jove, however, communicating angrily with lightning and thunder, drew men back into civil life. Identifying a 'Jove function' in Mexican mythology would therefore only be an empirical consequence of the general theory of the *NS*. The source text for the 'elegant metaphor' cited in *Idea* is the *NS* of 1725:

> Of all the children of the Sky, Jove was imagined to be the father and king of all the gods. Hence he was the origin of idolatry and divination, i.e. the science of auspices, because of the mode in which, as demonstrated above, he was the first god to be born in the Greek imagination. And, as our principles of poetry tell us, idolatry and divination were twin daughters born of that first civil metaphor in which Jove, identified with the Sky, would write his laws in lightning and promulgate them in thunder. From this metaphor came the first poetic civil sentiment in which the sublime and popular were united, more wonderful than anything to which poetry later gave birth: 'in the first age/the heroes read the laws on Jove's breast'. (Vico, [1725] 2002: §411)

The verse cited by Boturini (in Italian) refers back to the metaphor that Vico calls 'that first civil metaphor in which Jove [was] identified with the Sky'. The metaphor further creates what Vico calls 'the first poetic civil sentiment', the first social bond. In the imagination of 'the heroes', the language of the god is thought to be a sequence of *writing* and *speech*. However, the trope will also have further offspring, namely the 'twins' idolatry and divination. In other words, it seems to follow that the society that here comes into being will be doomed to idolatry and divination. A further consequence of this would be that the 'cultural' aetiology offered is strictly limited to 'gentile cultures'. Thus, a religious concern seems to interfere with the discovery of 'culture' as a 'category of thought'. How is this 'primal scene' adapted in Boturini's text? How is it used to interpret his *museo historico indiano*? And, to what extent does this general theory of a pagan 'cultural field' become an instrument of translation in *Idea*?

Boturini's aim when he quotes the 'elegant metaphor' is to explicate what he calls 'the hieroglyph Tlaloc'. He also announces that he has the 'effigy' of this deity 'in his museum'. Thus, the target of the metaphor is not only a product of the 'cultural other', it is also an object belonging to the collection that the collector claims as his own. Perhaps to supplement the reader's lack of access to this as a source, Boturini adds that the Neapolitan travel-writer Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri, in the volume on New Spain in his *Giro del mondo*, printed a copy of this effigy:

> TLALOC, cuya efigie tengo en mi Archivo; y de quien trae la copia en su Historia del *Giro del Mundo* el Doctor Francisco Gemmelli Carreri [*sic*] *tom.6. pag. 83* es Geroglifico de la Segunda Deidad, y casi Ministro de la Divina Providencia. (Boturini, 1746: 12; italics in the original)

> TLALOC, whose effigy I have in my Archive, a copy of which is provided in Doctor Francisco Gemmelli Carreri's [*sic*] history of the *Giro del Mundo vol. 6. pag. 83.* is Hieroglyph of the Second Deity, and almost minister of Divine Providence.

This reference to an illustration in the work of another Italian traveller also underlines that the following description and explication of the 'hieroglyph' will be an *ekphrasis* of an object forming part of Boturini's museum. It functions both as a reference and as a way of expressing that the effigy in the *museo* is a better source:

> En dicha estampa se vè à Tlaloc coronado con diademas de plumas, que deben ser blancas, y verdes, teniendo en la mano derecha una Centella, y en la siniestra una Rodela, hermoseada de otras muchas plumas de color celes[te]; en cuyos tres colores symbolizaban, en el blanco, aquellos primeros hijos, que candidos havian de nacer en la hermosura de los matrimonios; en el verde, la propagacion de sus linages; y en el celeste, el cuidado, que se les encargaba de mantener pura la Religion, y constantes los sacrificios para con los Dioses. (Boturini, 1746: 12)

> On the mentioned picture, one sees a Tlaloc crowned with feather diadems, which must be white and green. In the right hand he holds a bolt of lightning, and in the left, a shield adorned with many other feathers of a sky-blue colour. These three colours symbolised the following: white, those first children that were born innocent within the harmony of matrimony; green, the propagation of their lineages; and sky blue, the care they took in keeping religion pure and providing regular sacrifices to the gods.


**Figure 1.** Tlaloc, illustration from Gemelli Careri, G. F. (1728) *Giro del mondo del Dottore D.Gio. Francesco Gemelli Careri. Nuova edizione accresciuta, ricorretta, e divisa in nove volumi. Con un Indice de ' Viaggiatori, e loro opera. Tomo sesto. Contenute le cose più ragguardevoli vedute nella Nuova Spagna.* Presso Sebastiano Coleti: Venice

Boturini not only supplements Gemelli Careri's black-and-white illustration with the colours of the feather-diadem on Tlaloc's crown, he also deciphers their symbolic meaning (cf. Gemelli Careri, 1728: Figure 1). Contrary to Gemelli Careri, who wrote that the hieroglyph of the 'idol' signified 'rain and abundance' (1976: 59–60), the Milanese seeks the social meaning of the colours; they are to be seen as symbols representing social institutions: matrimony, the propagation of the lineage, i.e. family, property and inheritance, and, lastly, religion. This exposition of the iconological significance of Tlaloc's

crown is perfectly consistent with the *NS*. Vico argues that the common sense of humankind is based upon three customs: belief in a divinity, marriage and burial, which by demarcating the land around the graves gives rise to property held in common in families (see Vico, [1725] 2002: §10). These customs are all a consequence of the first civil metaphor and the sequences of events that are set in motion with the appearance of Jove.

The hieroglyph of Tlaloc, then, is the 'material base', the 'fundament' of the historical narration from the museum upon which Vico's first civil metaphor is inscribed. While the appropriation of Tlaloc as a figure in the collector's *museo* introduces the paragraph, the quote of the 'elegant metaphor' of the 'Italian poet' comes towards the end. Tlaloc is the promulgator of Providence, but Boturini identifies Tezcatlipoca with Providence itself. We have seen that in 'the first age', the Mexicans believed that Providence 'wrote the laws with lightning and promulgated them with thunder'. This, claims Boturini, is 'the same' as what an 'Italian poet' said about Jupiter. Hence, what at first appears as a principle of 'cross-cultural identity' is postulated around this 'sameness'. What is the principle behind the equivalence? We have also seen that this principle applies both to the manner of fabricating gods (rhetorically, by metaphor) and to the 'natural' and/or literal referent of the trope (thunder and lightning). Metaphor thus serves as the bridgehead between the worlds of Jove and Tlaloc. However, the space between the pagan deities and their different worlds is taken by Providence; the pagan gods do the work of Providence. These deities, with their different iconographies and proper names, are, in the last instance, surface manifestations of a latent theological principle.

The verse taken from the Italian poet clearly functions as a window that enables Boturini to 'see', in a theoretical vision, Tlaloc and Jove as objects belonging to the same theoretical field, susceptible to the same explanation. But is this a cultural field produced by a purely human *poiesis*?

The first civil metaphor – in the source text *and* the translation – is based upon a schema:

1. There is a *belief* in a personified divinity who
2. *communicates* with the natural signs of lightning and thunder, which are seen
3. *metaphorically* as if they were
4. *writing and speech*, semiotic forms through which
5. the law was *promulgated* in both the New and the Old Worlds.

The law manifests itself through a sensory process that goes from vision to voice, from lightning to thunder, rather instantly, like the passage from eye to ear when reading aloud. This semiotic sequence of writing and speech

serves as a 'trans-cultural' constant. At a level between the sameness of nature (lightning and thunder) and the surface difference of the gods, the projection of the semiotic and cultural forms of writing and speech upon the events taking place on the sky is the same. But, this is not purely a scene of human *semiosis*, of a projection of human, cultural meaning onto a non-signifying nature. On the contrary, it is willed by Providence who functions as the main actor. Although they take a local cultural form, the signs read by the heroes are *given* to be read by a super-natural and hence 'super-cultural' being – a being belonging to another ontological realm than that of culture producing humans.

The semantic field of the first civil metaphor – and its underlying ontological commitment – is, in this way, radically different from that found in any 'secular' oppositions between nature and culture, and the natural and the supernatural. Consequently, this is not the initial movement in the game of a purely human construction of culture through metaphor and poetic making, but rather a response where the activity of reading is inextricably linked to the passivity of receiving signs given in nature by a divine author. We are, then, rather far from the anthropocentrism of cultural modernity, as this, for instance, is expressed in Max Weber's definition of culture as 'a finite segment of the *meaningless infinity* of the world process, a segment on which human beings confer meaning and significance' (Weber, 1969: 81; my emphasis).

Vico regarded hieroglyphs and the first civil metaphor as primitive men's cognitive response to events that they were unable to comprehend. Due to the absence of abstract thought in what he called the 'childhood of the world', the gods and hieroglyphs of the early men who lived outside the space where God intervened directly (only the Hebrews received divine assistance directly – and literally – from God) were personified and animated as deities representing the necessities of life. This collocation of 'primitivism' and 'idolatry' thus defines Vico's unit of investigation. Moreover, it also enables him to compare 'cultures' from different historical times and places, and to inscribe them all in what he calls the 'first age'. One example (from the *NS* of 1744) captures his way of processing information from different historical and ethnographical zones and transforming it into a unit of investigation. It is taken from a section of the text where Vico treats the 'language of the gods' – i.e. the hieroglyphs of 'the first age', where Boturini's Tlaloc-hieroglyph would also belong. Here Greeks, Romans, Amerindians and Egyptians are all turned into instances of 'the same':

> There can be no doubt that among the Latins Varro occupied himself with the language of the gods, for he had the diligence to collect thirty thousand of their names, which would have sufficed for a copious divine vocabulary, with which the peoples of Latium might express

> all their human needs, which in those simple and frugal times must have been few indeed, being only the things that were necessary to life. The Greeks had gods to the number of thirty thousand, for they made a deity of every stone, spring, brook, plant, and offshore rock. [. . .]. *Just so* [*appunto come*] the American Indians *make* [*fanno*] a god of everything that exceeds [*supera*] their limited understanding. *Thus* [*talchè*] the divine fables of the Greeks and Latins must have been *the first true hieroglyphs, or sacred or divine characters, corresponding to those of the Egyptians.* (1968 [English] and 1990 [Italian]: §437; my emphasis)

In this dense passage, Vico undertakes a comparison of world-historical scope. The cited text begins in the past, with Greek and Roman polytheism. Rather abruptly – in the clause beginning with 'just so' – he then turns to his present-day America and assimilates this into the same 'cultural' unit with the manner of creating the gods as the criteria of identity. From 'our' point of view, this obviously erases the historical and cultural difference between the Greco-Roman past and the ethnographic present of the *americani* (although the verbs in this clause are in the present tense and thus retain traces of a certain difference). The concluding clause, beginning with 'thus' (signalling continuity of subject and a coming conclusion), returns to the Mediterranean past, adds the Egyptians, and reaches a form of 'trans-cultural' conclusion that applies to all the times and places that have furnished ethnographic and historical evidence for the proposition put forward here. In this passage, the fables of the gods from classical antiquity and the hieroglyphs of the Egyptians are equated. In the last instance, these semiotic forms are not only about 'the same' (gods who represent basic human needs) but they signify their basic socio-economic referent in the same way (hieroglyphically) as well. Thus, information from the Americas can serve as evidence for an argument that begins and ends in the Old World, and concludes by postulating the sameness of Greco-Roman fables and Egyptian hieroglyphs.

The common trait that makes these huge leaps in cultural-historical time possible is the identification of fables with hieroglyphs, but added to this is a collocation of 'primitiveness' with 'idolatry'. This, then, is not a 'primitiveness' defined entirely in evolutionary terms as it is (still) influenced by theological concerns. This is evident if we turn to an earlier assimilation of Amerindian 'culture' in Vico. Already in *The Constancy of the Jurist* (a part of the *Universal Right* [1719–1721] 2000), Vico had quoted Acosta on the topic of how 'the sublimity of the fables proceeds agreeably from prejudices carried on from infancy'. Here Vico writes that 'the Peruvians, a most illiterate people [*stupidissima gens*], admitted that whatever exceeded the average size, like an

immense river, a mountain, a tree, as Acosta narrates in the *Historia*, were believed to be gods' ([1719–1721] 1936: 374 and [1719–1721] 2000: 372).[12]

Boturini is far from seeing Mesoamerican writing as the semiotic and cognitive means of a *stupidissima gens*. On the contrary, he praises it because hieroglyphs, like Tlaloc, 'envelop a sea of erudition' (Boturini, 1746: 2; see Mignolo, 1995: 149–150). Even if Boturini follows Vico and places 'his' Tlaloc in 'the first age', stating that the 'same' was said about Jove in the first civil metaphor, he refuses to translate the constellation of primitivism, idolatry, hieroglyphs and fables as a total 'unit' with all its 'cultural' and theological collocations. This refusal should be related to what I called the split references of his museum and text: every statement of the value of Mesoamerican 'culture' and its 'sources' also refers to the symbolic value of Boturini's own 'museum' as a 'possession'. Placing Mesoamerican 'culture' in a primitive and idolatrous zone would imply a devaluation of the *museo*. This also means that a certain hybridity that dislocates clear-cut binaries between the cultural 'self' and the 'other' enters already at this practical level of antiquarianism, long before we turn to the unconscious.

We have seen that the description of acts of transfer or translations in the early modern period as 'cultural translations' itself amounts to a cultural translation into our 'culture cult'; an inscription into a conceptual framework that the actors did not share. Erasing this difference – paradoxically – is the same as erasing the culture of actors and authors like Boturini and Vico. The pragmatics of collecting applies mainly to the singularity of the 'Boturini case'. The broader semantic and conceptual issues of how 'cultures' were translated before the term came into general use, however, offers us the possibility of studying how 'others' looked upon 'others' before 'culture' became a common place in the interpretation of 'otherness' – and through this it also offers a way of historicising the common sense of the present.

12 The source seems to be a passage from the fifth chapter of Acosta's *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* where he treats Mexican and Andean idolatry: 'Porq[ue] en la mayor parte de su adoració[n] y ydolatria se ocupaba en ydolos, y no en las mismas cosas naturales, aunque a los ydolos se atribuyan estos efectos naturales, como de llover, y del Ganado, de la Guerra, de la generación, como los griegos y latinos pusieron también ydolos de Febo, y de Mercurio, y de Júpiter, y de Minerva, y de Marte' (Because in the main part of their adoration and idolatry they were concerned with idols, and not the natural things in themselves, although they attributed natural effects – like those of rain, the livestock, war, and generation – to the idols, in the same way as the Greeks and Romans raised idols of Phoebus, Mercury, Minerva, and Mars) (1590: 310; my translation).