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*The Philosophical Readings
of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Writers*

Edited by
Marco Piazza and Denise Vincenti

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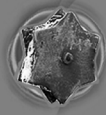
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Repetition and Circularity in Joyce and Vico

Barry Stocker

Abstract

The paper examines the ways in which Joyce's novel *Finnegans Wake* is the repetition of Vico's Enlightenment philosophical classic the *New Science*. If there is repetition then there is a circle of some kind in which each text leads into the other. Each of these texts makes an issue of both repetition and circularity. In the case of Vico, these apply to history, while in the case of Joyce these refer to the construction of his novel. The argument is that the repetition and circularity these texts deal with is repetition with change. This provides a way of understanding the relation between the texts. *Finnegans Wake* is not the illustrative repetition of the *New Science*. The *New Science* is an important structuring source for *Finnegans Wake*, but not a complete and final schema. Joyce creates a flow which flattens out the historical stages articulated by Vico.

James Joyce's use of Giambattista Vico's philosophy, as expounded in the *New Science*, in both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, is a notable use of philosophy and literature, but is more than that as Vico's philosophy is a kind of poetics of philosophy and history. Joyce is reacting to a way of integrating poetics and philosophy which informs his own writing. Vico provides an example of taking Homer as a model for understanding the poetic past, which Joyce develops. Homeric epic is a kind of science, or knowledge, or philosophy for Vico and this should be part of our understanding of how Joyce uses Vico and how Joyce writes. Vico is concerned with repetition in history, which refers to the nature of language, poetry and philosophy along with many other things. Joyce takes Vico as a model, not so as to replicate a Viconian schema, but so that he can repeat Vico in some sense that is both broader and more patchy, and so repeats Vico engaging in a form of repetition of Homer. Joyce himself is deeply engaged in writing which is concerned with repetition as a basic stylistic device within writing and as a more structural aspect in which external forms are repeated and internal forms are built up through repetition.

Vico's *New Science* is one of the less read of major philosophical classics, but it is nevertheless a major presence in literature as well as philosophy, along with other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Joyce's use of Vico in *Ulysses*, and even more so in *Finnegans Wake*, is a large part of this influence, which also covers the

historiography of Jules Michelet¹, the political thought of Georges Sorel², the literary thought of Erich Auerbach³, Edward Said⁴ and Hayden White⁵. Horkheimer⁶, Arendt⁷ and Gadamer⁸ refer to his role in establishing historical ways of thinking. He does not appear to have been widely read during the periods of Enlightenment, Romanticism and German Idealism, but there is much that he anticipates in the writers of these movements with regard to history as a distinct area of investigation, the elements of modern social sciences which are part of this approach to history, the importance of language and literature in the development of humanity, universal stages of human development, the transition from natural to social existence, along with myth and literature as sources of knowledge about human societies.

His central achievement is the *New Science*⁹, first published in 1725, particularly the third and final edition of 1744. I explain my views on Vico at length in 'Epic in Aristotle and Vico', chapter 2 of *Philosophy of the Novel*¹⁰, and I am working on further commentary. The central idea is that history moves through three major stages and that these

1 Donzelli (1981).

2 Hutton (1976).

3 Auerbach (1948).

4 Said (1975).

5 White (1976); (1983).

6 Horkheimer (1993).

7 Arendt (1958).

8 Gadamer (2004), pp. 22 and 225.

9 Vico (1975).

10 Stocker (2018).

stages are repeated¹¹. The repetition goes through a first cycle running from the earliest human societies (emerging from the caves and forests) to the fifth century fall of the western Roman Empire, with the second cycle running from the establishment of Germanic kingdoms in the western Roman lands until the time of Vico, with the expectation that it will carry on for many more years. The stages of each cycle are the divine age, the heroic age and the human age. The human age itself has two stages, which are democratic and monarchical.

The divine age refers to the rule of the patriarchs of small communities who are regarded as god kings. Vico's examples include the cyclops of Homer's *Odyssey*, Book IX. The heroic age refers to the rule of warrior aristocrats who claim to be descended from gods. Examples include the heroes of Homeric epic and the rulers of the very early Roman Republic. The human age refers to the subordination of aristocratic rulers and priests to a public law system for equal citizens. Examples of the democratic stage include the Roman Republic after the plebeians secured full political rights and the Athenian democracy. Examples of the monarchical stage include the Emperors who ruled Rome after the fall of the Republic.

The first cycle of history ends with the invasion of the western Roman Empire by German tribes in the fifth century. The second cycle begins¹² with a new divine age in which the descendants of German

11 *Ibidem*, Book 4.

12 *Ibidem*, Book 5.

invaders rule western Europe as petty kings claiming to represent divine authority as represented by the saints of the area, in late antiquity and the early middle ages. The new heroic age is the period in the high middle ages in which there is a large class of knights going to war in defence of the Church. The new human age begins with the emergence of self-governing city communes, in the late middle ages, which marks the democratic stage. The monarchical stage appears with the more absolute monarchs of the middle ages who persist into Vico's own time. Eighteenth century Europe was dominated by princes and kings claiming absolute powers.

These ages are also ages in the development of language and literature¹³. The divine age is the age of objects used for communication along with divine ceremonies. The heroic age is the age of heraldry and emblems. The human age is the age of alphabetical writing. Vico's way of expressing himself means that the exact nature of the writing of the first two ages is not immediately clear, but he appears to be referring to the use of objects in messages, the communicative nature of religious writing and to hieroglyphic writing based on depiction of objects for the divine age. For the heroic age, he most obviously appears to be referring to the emblems of aristocratic families and the heraldry they use in war, along with the 'imaginative universals', that is metonymic examples of a class of objects. Less obviously, he appears to be referring to early alphabetic writing in which the iconic denotative origin of letters and their use

13 *Ibidem*, Book 4, Section V.

in sacred writing dominates over more pragmatic everyday forms of alphabetic writing.

The language of the human age is most clear in Vico's account, as it is the alphabetic writing of philosophy, law and the post-poetic kind of literature which is typified by Aesop. Poetry begins in the divine age and Vico really understands poetry properly speaking as a continuation of divine poetry. Orpheus serves as an example of the earliest divine poets, but this of course leaves us with no exemplary texts. Homer and Hesiod are referred to as divine poets though telling us more about the heroic age, particularly in the case of Homer. The Homeric heroes are metonymic stand ins for general qualities, most obviously Achilles for anger and Odysseus for cunning.

The equivalent of Homer for the second cycle of history is the eleventh century *Chanson de Roland*¹⁴. Vico also mentions Dante's *Commedia*, Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, and Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*. These Italian epics might be better grouped with the *Aeneid* of Virgil though, as the Latin epic is clearly more formed by the human age than the Homeric epics. Vico does not deal directly with this issue, but his account of Virgil does show an articulated understanding of the imperial state and state frontiers lacking in Homer and even irrelevant to the Homeric world.

A simplified and rationalised version of Vico's text is offered here. The *New Science* is built up in series of sections shifting between aspects of

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, Book 1, Section XXI.

his argument which should show through even a summary unified version, if some attempt is made at a genuine presentation of Vico's labyrinthine thought and oblique style of argument. While it is necessary to look at Joyce in relation to Vico, it is not a good method to try to reduce *Finnegans Wake* to an expression of Vico's philosophy, in the same way that while comparisons with the *Odyssey* are necessary when writing on *Ulysses*, it is not a proper procedure to interpret it primarily through the Homeric framework. As far as Vico is concerned, his philosophy is both too unconstrained by its own schema to make it a proper source of a schema for Joyce's *Ulysses*, and it is too rationally articulated to provide an interpretative schema for *Finnegans Wake*. The *New Science* provides a perspective on *Finnegans Wake* and enthusiasts for Joyce's novel should study it, but is not the key or even a key to *Finnegans Wake*. Work like that of William York Tindall's *A Reader's Guide to James Joyce*¹⁵ or Eric McLuhan's *The Role of Thunder in Finnegans Wake*¹⁶ are admirable in the scholarship and thoroughness with which they try to tie Joyce to Vico, which is inevitably a particular view of Vico, but are misguided with regard to what their work reveals about Joyce.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are key to understanding history, for Vico¹⁷. Although Homeric epic focuses on the heroic age we can see in it a transition from the earlier divine age as well as transition to the

15 Tyndall (1959).

16 McLuhan (1997).

17 Vico (1975), Book 3.

human age. The three ages might be considered as four, given that Vico divides the human age into a period of democracy and the period of monarchy which follows it. Human history begins with storms following great floods as described in *Genesis*. Giant humans roam forests without language or community. In a moment that Joyce brings into *Finnegans Wake*, repeatedly, thunder storms after the great flood terrify the early humans in such a deep way that they speak for the first time, saying something like “Jus”, which Vico takes as the origin of the Roman name for the king of the gods, Jove¹⁸. The fear of the thunderstorm takes these early humans from an animal existence to an existence aware of some divine transcendental force greater than material force, along with the use of language. It is this that enables a transition from indiscriminate promiscuity to the family and then to the clearing of land for agriculture and the first cities.

There is a common pattern in all human societies for the the transition to law governed communities, with shared mythologies of heroes and gods. One ancient nation stands apart from the common pattern, the Israelites, because they are directly lead by God. Other nations are governed by divine providence, but not in such a way as to be immediately aware of God. A mixture of Stoic determinism and Epicurean chance generally guides the nations. The different historical ages have different forms of religion, language, law and state power. In the divine age, family fathers act as

18 *Ibidem*, Book 2, Chapter IV.

kings over an extended household and are regarded as gods. This is the end of the process in which humans encounter thunderstorms, then live in caves, then start to clear the forests, then start farming and establish cities. The clearing of forest itself becomes a mythological event in which a Hercules figure kills lions. All nations have a Hercules in their mythology according to Vico.

The divine world gives way to the heroic world, in which warrior aristocrats who claim to be descended from the gods rule. They are not gods but they have unique access to the gods and their laws. The laws and the religious rituals, which are auguries and prophetic, are secret from the common people who are regarded as bestial by the heroes. The world of heroes leads into the human world, which begins as democracy. Democracy emerges from the struggles of the common people with their own heroic warrior aristocracy. The common people have had mere natural rights without citizenship or proper property rights since the cities were formed. In the human age, they achieve equality in all spheres. The laws become publicly available.

Language itself changes as it becomes written in letters understandable by all the people. Vico associates divine language with hieroglyphics understandable to the priests only, that is they are only understandable to the god-kings. The heroic world is that described by Homer. The divine world appears as the community of the cyclops in the *Odyssey*. The human world appears in the luxuries of great palaces and the caves of nymphs in the

Odyssey. The human world begins with democracy in politics, but Vico thinks this must collapse between factions partly based on the distinction between common people and aristocracy. He takes the history of ancient Athenian democracy but mostly the Roman republic as models here. What follows is the emergence of human monarchy, which protects all citizens equally through laws applied moderately with regard to the context of each case. The model here is still Roman, referring to Julius Caesar and the subsequent Emperors who took “Caesar” as a title.

Significantly from the point of view of reading Joyce, Vico is concerned with the repetition of this cycle. The cycle must end, because it is based on a transition through each age from force to law, which means that law completely replaces force across the human age. The disappearance of force from the source of law means that there is no compulsion to obey law, leading to the decay of the royal power so that there is no effective state power. The final collapse is the return to the unrestrained violence of the beginning of the divine age. The cycle then begins all over again.

The cycle is also a transformation in language, which is a transformation from materiality to abstraction, metaphor to concept. There is a death of art consequent upon the linguistic transformation, which must end in a level of abstraction and conceptuality incompatible with any aesthetic aspect. Vico does not deal with the death of art at this extreme, but it is implicit in what he writes and a lesser death of art is apparent in the initial transition

from heroic to human worlds. Homer belongs to the heroic world, while Plato belongs to the emergence of the human world and Aesop is the product of the human world and a kind of end of art¹⁹. There is a different kind of end of art in Joyce, which is the exhaustive exploration of the possibilities of forms, styles and use of words. The end of art as the loss of the epic is present in Joyce, as can be seen in the relation between *Ulysses* and epic, in which epic is dissolved into the everyday. *Ulysses* is also a possible collapse of literary form into linguistic transformation and invention, which draws on the Viconian exploration of the possibilities of language across historical ages.

The comparison of Joyce's literature with Vico's philosophy is complex since there are no clear limits between allusion and accidental similarity. The existence of Viconian echoes in Joyce is very clear, but how much of Joyce's writing continues from Vico cannot be completely determined. Since Vico himself is concerned with the kind of language use, the general forms of language, then any Joycean exploration of language is possibly a form of engagement with Vico. The discussion of Joyce and Vico should then take some account of the question of the forms of writing, and how writing about Joyce and Vico is an exercise in a form of writing. It is possible to write about Joyce and Vico in a thematic way, separate from questions of form and writing, but the best way of approaching Joyce and Vico must be informed by an interest in philosophy

19 *Ibidem*, Book 2, Chapter III.

and literature as forms of writing, going through Montaigne, Schlegel, Kierkegaard, Emerson, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida, and Cavell amongst others. There is no attempt here to cover all these writers, but building on what is written here would require some encounter with these figures. Vico did not write as a philosopher-poet or experimenter with form, but his close engagement with literature and the possibilities of language, make him the necessary accompaniment to such thinkers. Reading Vico gives a greater understanding of such thinkers, and their importance for literature, as in for example, Joyce's way of writing owes something to his encounter with Vico.

Joyce brings the work of Vico, into *Finnegans Wake* after referring more obliquely to Vico in *Ulysses*²⁰. The first excerpts from the *Wake* were published as *Work in Progress* and commentary on Vico's place in *Finnegans Wake* begins with Beckett's essay on *Work in Progress*, "Dante...Bruno. Vico...Joyce"²¹. Direct reference to the name Vico in *Ulysses* occurs only once and obliquely in relation to the philosopher, but maybe there is more Vico than this suggests. There is a reference to "Vico Road"²² in the second chapter of *Ulysses* (Nestor), where Stephen Dedalus teaches history, thinks about history and argues with Mr Deasy, the headmaster, about history. It is clear that Joyce was familiar with Vico, and the interpretation of Vico, by the time he wrote *Ulysses*²³. It is unlikely

20 Joyce (1971).

21 Beckett, Brion, *et al.* (1939).

22 Joyce (1971), p. 30.

23 Mali (2012).

that he would have dropped a Vico reference, however casually and indirectly, into a discussion of history completely by accident. There is a context in which Stephen thinks of history, memory and an apocalyptic end of history, all suggestive of Vico. The primary consideration should anyway be the sense the reader can make of the text by deploying Vico and there is a lot that can be said on that account. Another consideration for *Ulysses* is the Latinate reference in the title to Homer's *Odysseus*, the hero of the *Odyssey*. Not only does the title push the reader towards Homer, but Joyce himself used Homeric titles in the first publication of parts of *Ulysses*. The final book has no Homeric chapter titles, but an authorised commentary on *Ulysses* by Stuart Gilbert does²⁴. This is significant for discussion of Vico, since Vico's *New Science* puts the discussion of Homeric epic at the centre. It is a comprehensive philosophy of history, which places Homer in the second of three ages of history, but also makes it a bridge between all three ages, starting in the first age and showing traces of the third age.

Ulysses hints briefly at a structural connection with the *New Science*, which might be taken in the light of Joyce's interest in the repetition of the *Odyssey*. In this case the connection with Vico is that Joyce sees repetition in history. The nature of the repetition is complicated though by the status of the repetition of Vico's heroic age in early twentieth century Dublin. There is no close parallel between Leopold Bloom, mild mannered advertising

²⁴ Gilbert (1955).

salesman, and Odysseus the city destroying warrior of Homer. Bloom can only be seen as a character of the human age. In Vico's thinking, the *Odyssey* is closer to the human age than the *Iliad*, but he still refers to *Odysseus* as a character of the heroic age very distinct from the characters of the human age. Joyce's use of Homer and of Viconian historical repetition is itself a critical transformation of Vico's historical philosophy. The mark of humanity in the human age for Vico is the king as supreme judge. For Joyce it is the middle class worker in commerce. Commerce is fundamental to the human age as opposed to the warrior hero, for Vico, so in that respect, it is appropriate that the human age hero is an advertising space salesman.

Dublin of the early twentieth century does have some connections with a past of heroic warriors and a current interest in warrior heroism. The chapters of *Ulysses* were published serially in the *Egoist* at the same time as the Irish War of Independence against Union with Great Britain. *Ulysses* was published in book form in 1922, a few months before the outbreak of the Civil War between the faction which negotiated the Anglo-Irish Peace Treaty and the faction that rejected it. *Ulysses* is set in 1904 when the Irish national movement was very largely peaceful, but certainly had support from most of the Irish and there was an element committed to national sovereignty through armed revolution. Joyce himself was a committed nationalist who had criticisms of the main moderate home rule movement. The beginning of violence as the main weapon of Irish nationalism, in the Easter

Uprising of 1916, repelled Joyce though.

The Sinn Fein advocate of militant nationalism and archaeo-politics, full of reference to the literature and myth of the Gaelic past, is satirised in chapter 12 “Cyclops”. This introduces a complication in Joyce’s relations with Viconianism and his general use of mythopoetic echoes. “Cyclops” does not just satirise the nationalist fanatic, it potentially satirises Joyce’s own use of an archaeo-mythical approach (something often associated with ultra-nationalist movements) which can be extended to Vico’s own approach to human history, that is an approach which seeks historical truth in divine poetry of the archaic past. There may be an element of parody of epic in Joyce, but *Ulysses* cannot be thought of except in terms of illumination that comes from comparing the present with ancient poetic archetypes. “Cyclops” has particularly Homeric aspects in the desire of the “Citizen” for “heroic” nationalistic violence and touches of Homer parody, as in the long lists, which can also be understood as a Rabelaisian technique, but that technique itself is a reaction to Homer. *Ulysses* itself refers to the ambition to write a national epic, as is discussed in chapter 9, “Scylla and Charybdis”, so is a conscious attempt to emulate what Homer did for the ancient Greeks or what Virgil did for the Romans. Joyce refers more directly to Cervantes and Shakespeare, but the ancient epics are unavoidable as part of the context. The grotesque Citizen, who is presumably a cyclops, the monster lacking in hospitality and unrestrained in his violence, murdering the companions of Odysseus in the

Odyssey, as he attacks foreigners in Ireland, along with Jews, and threatens violence against Bloom, is a product of archaeo-mythic thinking and return to the epics of archaic heroes.

Finnegans Wake is a deeper immersion in the mythic, the poetic and the archaic, which aims at the Irish and the universal. This is itself Viconian as is the circular nature of *Finnegans Wake*. Vico's philosophy of history has an energy within it of violence and war, as opposed to law and language. The emergence of civil institutions is itself a way of controlling violence. The earliest civil institution is burial of the dead²⁵. Human history begins with a move away from the horror of corpses devoured by wild animals. Vico's attitude here seems influenced by Homeric epic and Attic tragedy, where the prospect of a corpse left on a battlefield to be eaten by wild dogs and birds is a definitive horror. The Viconian interest in institution of burial has precedent in *Ulysses*, Chapter 6 "Hades", where Bloom attends a funeral. *Finnegans Wake* does not suggest a progress from burial of the dead onwards. There is a constant interaction of violence and language²⁶. On the first page of *Finnegans Wake*, Sir Tristram is fighting a war, but *Finnegans Wake* is not soaked in violence in its early sections. There is constant violence throughout, in the disarray of language and the transformations of words. The spatial aspect of written language is acknowledged by Vico, with regard to the hieroglyphs and physical signs of divine language. A play with

²⁵ Vico (1975), "Idea of the Work".

²⁶ Derrida (2013).

the material spatiality of words comes in at various times in *Finnegans Wake*. There is violence in the tensions between elements, including fragmentary characters and words expressing the breaks caused by rival energies.

The fragments are unified through repetition and circular structure, sometimes marked by reference to Vico: “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs”²⁷. The possible reference to Vico in the word ‘vicus’ is made definite by the ‘recirculation’, particularly in combination with the way that this sentence with no beginning follows on from the sentence with no ending, which concludes *Finnegans Wake* “A way a lone a last a loved a long the”. The first page contains another reference to Vico in the thunder word ‘bababbabdalgharaghtakamminarronnkonbronntonneronntuonnthunntorvarrhounawnskawnto-ohooorderenthurnuk’. It is not an explicit reference, but the use of words for ‘thunder’ in various languages, the middle sequence of words similar to the word ‘thunder’ and the use of ‘baba’ to begin all suggest Vico. The thunder that frightens the early giants and also gives them the idea of the godly, gives them the idea of a divine father figure. ‘Baba’ is father in Turkish, originating in Farsi. There may also be a reference to the Tower of Babel²⁸, which is very appropriate to the profusion of linguistic variety in the *Finnegans Wake*.

27 Joyce (1975), p. 3.

28 Volpone (2018), p. 233.

Babel is not mentioned in the *New Science*, but the essential variety of language is present in the distinctions between divine, heroic and human language. As noted above, the word “Jus” is suggested to the early giants by the thunder according to Vico, a word that appears in all languages in different forms referring to the father god and law, so there is a suggestion of universal archetypes underlying the profusion of languages. Joyce turns the Viconian interest in the transition from divine to heroic to human language into a constant interplay of registers. Any idea that *Finnegans Wake* is divided in any substantive way, between its four parts according to Vico’s historical schema, must be contrived and is not based on reading experience. A better model can be found in Vico’s account of the Homeric epics as combining references from different eras in ways which do not refer to a chronological progression through the text. Vico’s account of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* argues that they are the collective product of minstrels as a class, and therefore of the ancient Greek people as a whole.

Finnegans Wake combines the aim alluded to in *Ulysses*²⁹ of writing a national epic with the cosmopolitan goal of writing a universal epic. This is a Viconian project to some degree as he believes that every people has its own myth and epic based on the same universal concerns. It is non-Viconian in that Vico believes that epic must be rooted in stories which come from a self-enclosed period of a community, before the human age unfolds properly

29 Joyce (1971), Chapter IX, “Scylla and Charybdis”.

as an age of commerce and intercourse between peoples. Vico does not imagine a fully cosmopolitan world, but he sees the first human age as rooted in the quasi-universal Roman Empire and the second human age as referring to a world of European monarchies.

Finnegans Wake is constructed from a linguistic profusion and playfulness that is like nothing in Vico's world. François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* might be taken as a precedent for Joycean writing, but Vico shows no awareness of it, along with his general lack of awareness of literature after fifteenth century Italian epic. *Finnegans Wake* can be seen as a Viconian text, in which Vico's interest in the different possibilities of language is radicalised through experiences of language following on from: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Essay on the Origins of Language*³⁰; Wilhelm von Humboldt's *On Language*³¹, the logical investigation of language in Gottlob Frege³², Bertrand Russell³³ and Ludwig Wittgenstein³⁴, which questions the relation between meaning and reference to reality; literary playfulness with language in Lewis Carroll, itself connected with logical and philosophical interests³⁵; Symbolist poetry in Mallarmé³⁶ and others, stretching the limits of form and meaning; Nietzsche's genealogical

30 Rousseau (1998).

31 Humboldt (1999).

32 Frege (1984).

33 Russell (1992).

34 Wittgenstein (2001); Singer (1990).

35 Atherton (1952); Carroll (1895); (2000).

36 Piette (1996).

approach to meaning³⁷, which echoes Vico's commitment to a method combining philosophy and philology³⁸.

If we look at Vico on language from one perspective, he has an onomatopoeic account of the origins of language and the name of god which looks strange, even a few decades later, when Rousseau emphasises the distinction between the natural force and the social structure in language, followed by Humboldt's account of the systematic generative nature of language. However, if we look at the *New Science* on language across the text, we can see that Vico undermines any reduction of language to onomatopoeia because of the importance he gives to metaphor, with a metonymic emphasis, along with language as presentation of objects in its early 'divine' phase, springing from the divine noise of thunder. Human language is understood to be focused on abstract universals and simple allegories, as in Aesop, with little metaphor. In 'heroic' language the force of words, which are absolute commands when uttered by heroic rulers, or the earlier divine kings, also comes from expressing simple emotions. Taking his perspectives as a whole and making the different stages simultaneous for a complete understanding of language, Vico has a view of language as iconic-depictive, verbal and pictorial, metaphorical-metonymical, mythical-divine, abstract conceptual, allegorical, emotive and performative-commanding, as well as onomatopoeic. Taking all these moments

37 Valente (1987).

38 Miner (2002).

in account, Vico has the elements for understanding a kind of literary writing which plays off the different aspects of language to create a reading experience of the limits of language and intelligibility, along with the multiple forms of language. This is the experience of reading *Finnegans Wake* and Vico anticipates the ways in which we can use the later ideas about language, as listed above, to grasp what Joyce is doing.

The Romantic movement develops aesthetic forms distinct from the epic classics from Homer to Tasso which are Vico's dominant way of connecting with the aesthetic world, but we can see Vico as leading the way, when he emphasises myth and folkishness in the Homeric epics, which he puts at the centre of his understanding of history. This anticipates Romantic concerns with myth and history, as well as the ways in which Vico anticipates Romantic interests in imaginative production and play with forms. This all feeds into Joyce. Vico's stadial view of history fits with Enlightenment theories of history, particularly in Adam Smith³⁹ and Adam Ferguson⁴⁰. His cyclical view is less part of later Enlightenment thinking, though Ferguson may be an exception of some kind. Later Enlightenment thinkers may fear a collapse back to the 'savage' first stage of history, close to Vico's idea of the divine age, or more likely a falling back of some kind from the highest development of commercial society with political institutions. Reactions to the French Revolution, from enthusiastic participants and from

39 Smith (1982).

40 Ferguson (1995).

critics like Edmund Burke, show the continuing interest in the idea that past history is repeated, which in the case of the French Revolution referred to the ancient history of Rome.

By the time of Joyce though, such neat patterns of repetition are not so widespread. Joyce was aware of more occultist theories of history in his time, such as that developed by W.B. Yeats in *A Vision*⁴¹, a book only published two years before *Finnegans Wake*, but part of a broader Irish and international interest in the occult itself influenced by Yeats' contacts with the theosophist Helena Blavatsky, who can be taken herself as a presence in *Finnegans Wake*⁴².

Finnegans Wake is not read better by trying to find a pattern from Vico, or Blavatsky or any other external source. What it shows are the possibilities of language and of the variety of possible patterning the words and expressions of language. This can be taken back to Vico and explains Joyce's interest in Vico. It is written from a point of view in which all the possibilities of style and register, in language, are flowing into each other. It is only a contrivance at odds with the read of the book to think of it as replicating Vico's stages and cycles or any pattern. The Viconian context is particularly valuable because it gives an indication of how we might structure a chaotic looking flow into brief temporary structures and hierarchies, which are in general valuable for guiding thoughts about history and the development of literary language.

41 Yeats (1978).

42 Platt (2008).

If there is a Viconian moment illuminating *Finnegans Wake*, it is one implied by Vico, but not directly described, where the legal order of society is breaking down at the end of the human age, because of the lack of force to uphold it so that the human world collapses in a return to the divine world. According to Vico, the human world loses its sense of poetic universals replacing them with a mixture of abstract universals in philosophy and didactic prosaic literary storytelling. *Finnegans Wake* is nothing predicted by Vico, but it is one way literature can be if the mythical-religious order behind epic and the force of its metonymical-metaphorical use of imagined singular things for universal, collapses into a storytelling which gathers the remains of imaginative poetry with metaphors that have heroic force in them. We can confirm this by looking at a sample of the text of *Finnegans Wake*.

“Leg-before-Wickedlags-behind-Wall where here Mr Whicker wacked a great fall”⁴³. This is a sentence from Book 3, Chapter 2, a chapter devoted to Juan, who may be associated with King Oedipus, “put your swell foot foremost”⁴⁴, and with Don Juan, “he was just the killingest ladykiller”⁴⁵, which makes a link with Søren Kierkegaard, another philosopher of great interest to Joyce^{46, 47} who wrote at length on the Don Juan/Don Giovanni figure in ‘The Immediate Erotic Stages or the Musical-Erotic’ from

43 Joyce (1975), p. 434.

44 *Ibidem*.

45 *Ibidem*, p. 430.

46 Benjamin (2014)

47 Ryan (2013)

*Either/Or I*⁴⁸. The association of Kierkegaard should emphasise the danger of reducing *Finnegans Wake* to an exercise in exemplifying the historical philosophy of Vico.

Returning to the quotation, the following non-exhaustive allusions can be found: “leg-before-wicket” referring to a way of losing a wicket in the game of cricket; “Whicker” referring to “Humphrey Carpenter Earwicker”, a recurring character in *Finnegans Wake*, who is himself an instance of the recurring archetypal character “Here Comes Everyone”, the Biblical Fall in the Garden of Eden itself appearing in the opening page of *Finnegans Wake*⁴⁹ where the word ‘fall’ appears just before the thunderword. The fall from a wall suggest Humpty Dumpty in the old nursery rhyme who appears in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, and who appears frequently in *Finnegans Wake* though obliquely⁵⁰. The “leg-before-wicket” cricket allusion merges with the wickedness behind the Fall in the Garden and the fall of Humpty Dumpty, himself strongly associated with a claim to master words, “When I use a word [. . .] it means just what I choose it to mean”⁵¹ before he falls from his wall with a great crash.

This one sentence, from Joyce, fuses religious ideas of the origin of sin and ideas of games, in words or on the field of sport. It alludes back to the opening in a complex way. It links the flow of

48 Kierkegaard (1987).

49 Joyce (1975), p. 3.

50 Atherton (1952).

51 Carroll (2000), p. 210.

allusions with a central archetype of *Finnegans Wake*. It is not suggestive of the rigorous application of a Viconian schema or method. It does suggest a world of repetition, in which the cycle of repetition overlays the stages of history to create a pattern of repetitions and allusions, itself stretching the constraining architecture of the cycle of stages. It does suggest that words can be played with, so that meaning always exist in tension with the possibilities of play with meaning, also placing the architecture in a perpetually unstable situation.

The Viconian aspects are that the apparent confusion of language and culture can be reduced by looking for recurring archetypes, words might have different meanings and value according to context. The first Viconian aspect refers to his way of reading: the origins of what we experience in the human age in the myths of the divine and hero age, that themselves refer to an underlying aspect of the human transition from wilderness to communities of farming and towns. What Joyce takes from Vico is that the language of the human age is full of the myths of the earlier ages, which fragment but which also inform our communication. The implicit reaction to Vico, not referring at all to anything Joyce ever theorised, is that the distribution across time of divine, heroic and human languages and storytelling must end up in the chaotic looking combination of them as they accumulate in cultural memory and perhaps were never separated properly speaking. The human world which is ordered by reason and law, must itself lose the mythic and figurative basis

of writing as deeply structuring, so that they appear in a random looking way in flattened out forms of writing, with no distinction between registers of language and no distinctions between the many myths.

Joyce gives an indication of this a few pages later when, as in *Ulysses*, he refers to the Vico Road in Dublin: "The Vico road goes round and round to meet where terms begin. Still onappealed to by the cycles and unappalled by the recourses we feel all serene, never you fret, as regards our dutiful cask"⁵². This gives a better indication of how to think about Vico in *Finnegans Wake* than attempts to equate sections of the novel with stages in Vico's history. The road goes round and round according to the text, which is not the case for the real road in Dublin, that is, it is not a circular road. Unlike *Ulysses*, then we should not think of references to Dublin as based on descriptive accuracy. It is clear why Joyce misrepresents Vico Road as circular, which is that he wishes to suggest something about Vico's historical philosophy. It is concerned with cycles, with a circular movement, and for Joyce that is more important than discrete stages. There is no beginning or end for a circular road, so there is no earlier or later. This is writing exploited to the full with regard to ordering before time.

Finnegans Wake has no overall historical or temporal progression, though passages may have some narrative development over time. It is the circularity and repetition of historical time which

⁵² Joyce (1975), p. 452.

counts in *Vico*, though picking from it in a way that stages from different cycles mingle. Dante who belongs to the second cycle according to *Vico* appears as does Homer from the first cycle. *Vico* himself allows for influence across the cycles, but not a mingling together. The *Vico* road goes round until terms begin. Since it is implied that it is a circular road, there is no meeting point, and there is no meeting point either for the real road which is more like a perpendicular in maps of Dublin. *Vico* Road might have a meeting point, if it was shaped like a stretched crescent with the tips of the crescent almost touching, but it is presented as a circle, where the meeting point is everywhere and nowhere, like the text of *Finnegans Wake*, though the text can be compared more to Blaise Pascal's "infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and its circumference is nowhere"⁵³. Meaning then begins everywhere, since every point contains the meeting point.

The next sentence refers to cycles and recurses, so refers to *Vico*'s cyclical history in two ways. 'Ricorsi' are the cycles of history in the *New Science*. At this point the narrator appears to favour detachment from the cycles of history, is not appalled by history and does not have any sense that history appeals. This is one approach to a view of history as endless cycles of repetition, that is an approach in which everything that can happen will happen, has happened, and will happen again. It is not *Vico*'s view, or at least it is not a view compatible with the Christian world view he claimed to adhere

⁵³ Pascal (1995), p. 66.

to, according to which history is headed towards an apocalyptic end, in which an eternal order of divine justice will appear destroying the world and time as we have known them. Vico's ideas of cyclical history draw on Epicureanism and Stoicism, in which the universe has a cyclical existence respectively guided by chance and necessity. Vico adopts a midpoint between them which also allows for the intervention of divine providence.

Vico treats the content of Christianity and Judaism, as something that has to be separated from his general investigation of myth and the development of nations in the cycles of history, because they are inspired directly by God. There might be an issue of the constraints Vico faced in eighteenth century Naples in writing on these topics, but it is only possible to judge his views on the evidence available. On the evidence, Vico still gives a picture of how a social world might develop without any monotheistic divinity, or divinity of any kind outside imagination, without the influence of Judaism and then Christianity on history. Joyce's world view makes Biblical religion just one set of myths amongst many. However, he does not have a simple sense of Epicurean or Stoic detachment, or certainly not at all points, as we can see looking at the end of the Juan chapter:

But, boy, you did your strong nine furlong mile in slick and slapstick record time and a farfetched deed it was in troth, champion docile, with your high bouncing gait of going and your feat of passage will be contested with you, and

through you, for centuries to come. The phaynix
 rose a sun before Erebia sank his smother!
 Shoot up on that, bright Bennu bird! *Va faotre!*
 Eftsoon so too will our own sphoenix spark
 spirt his spyre and sunward stride the rampante
 flambe. Ay, already the somber opacities of the
 gloom and spanished! Brave footsore Haun!
 Work your progress! Hold to! Win out, ye
 divil ye! The silent cock shall crow at last. The
 west shall shake the east awake. Walk while ye
 have the night for morn, lightbreakfastbringer,
 morroweth whereon every past shall full fost
 sleep. Amain⁵⁴.

This is an expression of joy in the constant journey through words and time. The repetition does not produce dread of an enclosed universe or indifference to the unchangeable plenitude of existence. There is no hope for transcendence. Oedipus (in the mask of “footsore Haun”) is not saved by the kind of transfiguration alluded to at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus*, but keeps walking, striding toward the sun. Juan finishes nine furlongs in record time. He is oriented towards the Bennu bird, linked in ancient Egyptian mythology with creation and rebirth. This bird may be the origin of the pheonix (“phaynix”), the mythical bird of fire and regeneration from the ashes. Jaun bounces high and strides towards the sun. He works and progresses walking towards a rampant flame. The past will fall asleep which is what enables the progress. The west will awaken the east, which is to say that death

54 Joyce (1975), p. 473.

will bring life. Joyce's interest in the west as the land of death and evening goes back to "The Dead" in *Dubliners*⁵⁵, but is here given a more affirmative sense. Night belongs to rebirth and creation and the constant journey forward which belongs to life and the earth, rather than eternity and transcendence. This is the journey that continues as the end of the book joins the beginning in a moment of rebirth, of life enduring in this constant walk towards the sun. The repetition is not a trap, it is not an expression of pessimism or nihilism. The complexity of the narrative, of its constantly evolving story, and its constant linguistic play, makes the infinity of re-reading, the repetition of the journey joyful.

We can think of this spirit as consonant with Vico's new science. Rebirth of history from destruction does allow a constant production of new forms of history. The Viconian repetition is not the identical coming back perpetually, but new variations within a basic pattern. *Finnegans Wake* leads us to a repeated reading of it in which there are always new interpretations and ways of reading. Joyce does not give this to the reader as an explicit theory, but it makes sense of his ways of appropriating Vico. For Vico, words begin with force and become more abstract over time. As words of force, they are part of the violent presence of the divine and its laws in the world of human institutions. The divine interacts violently with the material world in the emergence of language, itself opened up the moment in which natural force seems divine. There is a violence on

⁵⁵ Joyce (2000).

the mental faculties of giants, who must orientate themselves away from pure force in the use of laws and language. It is in this way that the world can be poetic and the loss of the poetic over the era of the human world becomes the death of the world, a death which becomes rebirth as the new chaos turns into a world of metaphor, myth and poetry.

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