

Vico's Thunderous Echoes:
The New Science and Finnegans Wake

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"Annah the Allmaziful, the Everliving, the
Bringer of Plurabilities" (Joyce 104)

Abstract

The *strandentwining* intertext of *Finnegans Wake* both obscures and unveils meaning. The cultural ramifications of James Joyce's intertext, however, run deep, as he subjects the relevant intertexts to subsequent rewritings in order to multiply meaning. In such context, intertextuality in itself can be likened to a translation, whereby otherness is adapted into a literary space to enable the construction or reconstruction of new significance, thus facilitating a far-reaching cross-cultural dialogue; both author and readers, in turn, assume the role of *poeta doctus* and *litteratus doctus*, respectively. Accordingly, the intertexts Joyce has sewn into the text are in constant transformation both *via* their medium and their audience, as is the case with the Viconian intertext. Giambattista Vico's *The New Science* was carefully integrated by Joyce into *Finnegans Wake*¹ and adapted to Irish society; Vico's philosophical thought, which permeates the *Wake*, provides structure and enables the layering of intertextual units, thus multiplying significations and intended meanings. Vico's theories on language and history enable diachronic and anachronic explorations within the *Wake*, as well as a simultaneous existence of different systems of thought. Joyce's use of the thunderwords as a primal linguistic expression, coupled

with his creative cultural exploits and the systematic structuring of the *Wake* find their origin in Vico's *The New Science*.

Keywords: intertextuality as translation, rewriting, adaptation, intertextual unit, intertextual framing, Viconian intertext, hieroglyph, collective unconscious

Julia Kristeva coined the term intertextuality in her 1966 essay, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," informed by her reading of Mikhail Bakhtin's "Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics" and "Rabelais and his World." She famously made plain a concept that had long been inferred: "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations" (37). She postulates that meaning is always, at least, double, and, thus, dependent on the person who is to interpret it. Kristeva's conceptualisation also sets forth the idea that a literary work is a social, historical, and, last but not least, cultural product. Consequently, any subsequent intertextual transfer entails a thorough domestication of the original intertext, so as to best integrate it into its new cultural reality. In this sense, intertextual spaces/elements, which carry in themselves cultural and historical significance, are prone to transfer and absorption by another literary space or culture (Kristeva 37). Intertextuality, in itself, conceptualizes a sort of translation or exchange, as "any text is the absorption and transformation of another," just as the act of translation is the absorption and transfer of a code in a target language (Kristeva 66). Following the cultural turn in literary studies, and informed by translation theories, Jeanne Hong Zhang, Lisa Wong, Li Xia, Kishori Nayak, and Marta Skwara presented a series of papers at the workshop entitled "A New Concept of World Literature: Cross-Cultural Intertextuality."² The papers focused on an aspect touched upon by Kristeva and by subsequent theorists of intertextuality, namely the cultural aspect of the intertext and the process of integrating one such intertext into a literary work, a process akin to a translation. Concerning these papers, Dutch linguist Douwe Fokkema remarks in "The Rise of Cross-Cultural

Intertextuality” that “the creative assimilation of texts and ideas in a new work . . . indicates an ultimate form of cultural integration, an explicit sign of transcending cultural barriers,” echoing Kristeva’s earlier claims (8). For these theorists, the cultural aspect is inherent to the written text; despite its intertextual reworkings, the written text always retains its cultural essence, and one can always trace its roots. In turn, such cultural coding contributes to multiplying meanings within the intertextual unit. Those literary texts which carry in themselves historical and social attributes, to such a degree as to make them cultural referents, are much more likely to be rewritten by a *poeta doctus* and are open to interpretation and deciphering. Difficulties occur, however, when the *poeta doctus* integrates an intertextual element into the text so thoroughly that the reader is rendered unable – be it due to his/her lack of erudition, or lack of knowledge about the cultural signifier the text hints at – to grasp its morefold meanings. One such work would require a *litteratus doctus*.

In *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton advises that “It is always worth testing out any literary theory by asking: How would it work with Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*?” – a statement which bears witness to the all-presence and kaleidoscopic nature of the text (71). Dubbed “the most colossal leg pull in literature,” the *Wake* is an *opera aperta* fraught with complex allusions, portmanteaus, multilingual puns, and abstruse plot lines (Ellmann 722). Published in 1939 to scathing reviews, Joyce’s linguistic experiment is still immutable in its position as a limit to literature and writing, respectively. The intertextual system of the *Wake*, characterized by its plurality and self-rejuvenating quality, aids in Joyce’s indicting of “humanity circling with fatal monotony about the Providential fulcrum” (Beckett 9). The non-linear and fragmented narrative of *Finnegans Wake* is a grand scale telling of the fall of Man, the fall of Finnegans and the falling asleep of the Earwicker family and their oneiric exploits; while dreaming, HCE, ALP, Shem, Shaun and Issy move through Dublin, *via* a culturally charged intertextual interplay.

In his Introduction to *Intertextuality (Research in Text Theory)*, Heinrich F. Plett labels Joyce as one of the authors who carefully hides his allusions and quotations, with his readership being in a continuous search for the intended meaning, such as is the case with the *Wake* (15). Furthermore, in his book *Literary Quotation and Allusion*, E. E. Kellett provides a succinct description of such *poeta doctus*:

a man who steals and boasts of his thefts: he covers his walls with paintings, and openly proclaims they are taken from a National Gallery. . . . he desires to be detected, and deliberately leaves clues to guide his pursuers to their prey. (3)

Such a description fits Joyce to a degree. On the one hand, Joyce carefully obscures meaning, and his *clues* are much more cryptic than needed; he trusts his readers to be able to uncover meaning even without his thought-out guidance. His rewriting of myth, allusions, quotations, and history is exquisite, and the language he creates for the *Wake* enables this concealment. Yet, on the other hand, as Ellmann remarks throughout his biography of James Joyce, he sought understanding and like-mindedness from his readership, while still being incredibly demanding of it. Consequently, Joyceans and readers alike are faced with the daunting task of unravelling the myriad of allusions and references that multiply within the text. It is worth pointing out that Joyce's employment of intertextuality is both overarching and structural, as well as concise and minimal; he obtains this effect via his use of intertextual frames for structure and intertextual units to multiply meaning. One of Joyce's reworkings, namely Giambattista Vico's *The New Science*, which provides the *Wake*'s famous cyclical structure and philosophical vein, also enables a plurality of meanings. Joyce's cultural translation and adaptation of Vico's theories on history and culture provide both a cosmopolitan allure to Irish society and bring to the fore the cultural uniqueness of Ireland. Also, by integrating Irish society and history into the "collective unconscious"

purported by Vico, Joyce universalises Irish culture and finds himself a conduit for his intertextual experiments.

It is worth mentioning in this context that these markers of the Viconian intertext that Joyce placed into the text, and his adaptation of Vico's work, or its relevant intertextual units, went unnoticed by the *Wake*'s initial readership. The first to remark on Joyce's use of Vico in *Finnegans Wake* was Samuel Beckett in his 1929 essay "Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce," who not only identified his mentor's use of the cyclical structure but also his transposing of Vico's conception on providence, language, and myth. Later, Anthony Burgess remarked that Joyce had not sought to interpret but adapt Vico's theories (191). Italian philosopher Vico's *The New Science* (1725) is a far-reaching and complete philosophical work whose ideas continue to bear fruit in modern philosophy. His dissection of humanity, history and language as a primordial element and conduit for societal evolution revolutionized Joyce's way of writing. Although Joyce obscures many of his Viconian allusions, scholars have discerned aspects pertaining to his philosophical thought both at a macro and micro level. As concerns the reader, who in his/her quality of *litteratus doctus* must decipher the text and its meanings, Vico is of utmost importance. Joycean scholar Donald Phillip Verene wrote in his Preface to *James Joyce and the Philosophers at the Wake* that "The reader must read the two books together – *Finnegans Wake* and *The New Science* – as a "twone." Such reading requires 'two thinks at a time.' Each book will change in the reader's mind about the other" (xi). As such, given that Joyce wrote/rewrote the *Wake* following his subsequent reading of *The New Science*, he expects his reader to do the same, at least for a modest grasp of the ideas circulated in the text. For a novice reader, Vico's philosophy can account for an introduction to the *Wake*. Be it the circular structure, unusual and changing language, historical and mythical characters that appear throughout the fragmented narrative, sometimes overlapping one another, Joyce's use of both anachronic and diachronic timelines, each finds its origin in Vico's philosophical thought. Although Joyce's intertextual integration of Vico in the text is complex,

certain aspects of the Viconian intertext are most easily traceable: the cyclical structure, the importance attributed to language, the ages, and the myth insertions.

Vico's work, which posits a cyclical view of history as "cavileer grace by roundhered force," and a rise and fall of civilizations, aligns with Joyce's thematic exploration of eternal recurrence and the cyclical nature of human existence (Joyce 465). In *The New Science*, Vico advances the idea of "three ages; namely, the age of gods, the age of heroes, and the age of men" which Joyce completes with a fourth, a *ricorso* – a period of chaos and return (27). In a sense, Joyce squares the circle, focusing on the text's "existence as a tesseract" (Joyce 100). The "□" form also enables Joyce's exploration of structure in a 4D, Euclidian manner. Should one imagine the *Wake's* structure as either a circle or a tesseract, one must keep in mind that the textual spaces and temporalities intersect, clashing into one another; therefore, one must imagine a circle, on top of an infinite number of circles, of which not all are aligned. While the concept of a tesseract might better encapsulate the systematic chaos of the *Wake*, Vico's circle is its foundational element. Accordingly, Vico's philosophy underscores the structural perfection of *Finnegans Wake*, with the text presenting a history moving in "vicous cicles" (Joyce 134). Similar to *Ulysses*, the *Wake's* chapters are bordered by page breaks and white space, so critics have made use of numbers and names to facilitate discussion of the text. In terms of structure, *Finnegans Wake* is split into four broad sections, labelled I, II, III, and IV. Book I contains eight chapters, whereas Books II and III have four each. Book IV has only one chapter, which is brief. Furthermore, the *Wake* adheres to Vico's 3 + 1 structure for its significant division into sections, with Books I, II, and III also conforming to this structure; the first book encompasses two cycles, while the second and third have one each. Reminiscent of the tesseract, the fourfold structure is also systematically integrated into the text *via* recurring mentions ("four owlers masters," "four of Masterers," "four Knocks"), or evocative enumerations of four: "eggburst, eggblend, eggburial and hatch-as-hatch" (Joyce 21; 91; 622; 614). The Viconian intertext is mirrored

in its cyclical and circular form in *Finnegans Wake* and thoroughly integrated. Accordingly, and famously so, *Finnegans Wake* begins in the middle of a sentence, “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs” and ends with its beginning: “A way a lone a last a loved a long the” (Joyce 3; 628). This looping sentence, which in itself is a lexical representation and adaptation of Vico’s concept of circular history, entails a never-ending cycle that the *Wake*’s reading is subject to. Vico also stands at the beginning and end of the text, intertextually assimilated in the “commodious vicus of recirculation” segment (Joyce 3).

In *The New Science*, Vico purports that the beginning of each age is marked by a loud thunderclap, a phonetic representation of the voice of God, “who, in the sizzle of his lightning and the crash of his thunder, intended to say something to them” (135). Fearful of thunder, but at the same time commanded by the wonder of the unknown, men, whom Vico likens to beasts, search for shelter and form communities to hide from that which they fear (Vico 172). Simultaneously, Vico links the emergence of language to these protohumans who try to imitate the divine thunderclap. In the *Wake*, the primordial thunderclap occurs on the very first page, marking Finnegan’s “great fall of the offwall,” ideographically represented by the “pftjschute” word (Joyce 3). Thus, in Joyce’s vision, a cultural aspect such as Tim Finnegan, a mere hod-carrier, is the one responsible for the first thunderclap word in the text. In the same vein, the thunderwords introduce Vico’s theories on language, and, consequently, provide hints at the language Joyce employs to best represent a certain age:

throughout this whole time, there were THREE LANGUAGES spoken, corresponding in number and order to these three ages: first, HIEROGLYPHIC, or speaking through sacred characters; second, SYMBOLIC, or speaking through heroic characters; and, third, EPISTOLARY, or speaking through characters of popular convention. (Vico 49)

Most of the *Wake's* style is chiefly hieroglyphic, as it best encapsulates a plurality of meanings, bearing both mythical, heroic, and social aspects. It is noteworthy that the hieroglyph falls in line with Kristeva's claim that meaning is always layered, dependent on its recipient. The hieroglyphic aspect, which is highly sacred and symbolic, is best represented in the *Wake* by the intertextual unit, a simple or complex lexical structure which is infused with a multiplicity of meanings, i.e. the thunderword. Consequently, Joyce's 10 thunderwords provide for primordial linguistic forms in the *Wake*. One such linguistic experiment occurs, as mentioned above, on the very first page of the *Wake*: "bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronntonnerronntuonnth unntrovarrhounawnskawntoohohoordenenthurnuk!" (Joyce 3). The initial monosyllabic form of the thunderword adheres to Vico's linguistic claim that language initially consisted of interjections, "articulate words under the impetus of violent passions, which in all languages are monosyllables" (171).

The Viconian structure stretches further, enabling thematic and intertextual explorations based on the historical and social divisions purported in *The New Science*. While Joyce's ages are not subsequent to one another, but fragmented throughout the narrative, they follow much of Vico's indications. As such, Vico's age of gods finds its correspondent early in Joyce's text by its mentioning of Eve and Adam, the age of heroes by the mythical figure of Fionn mac Cumhail, and the age of humans by HCE, the owner of a pub in Chapelizod, just to name a few. It is worth pointing out that, aided by the highly allusive and dream-like language, Joyce makes swift switches between ages, characters, and settings.

Joyce's temporalities and mythologies layer one another, and identity, interconnected with the cultural landscape, fragments and splits into a myriad of aspects. Such is the case for HCE/Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, and ALP/Anna Livia Plurabelle, two aspects in linkage with the Irish cultural intertext, exponents of Vico's historical ages and philosophical ideas. Both characters embody a composite amalgamation of cultural signifiers, perspectives, voices, and narratives, which reflect the polyphonic nature of cultural

identity. The enigmatic HCE/Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker epitomizes the fragmentation and fluidity of culture. He assumes various roles and identities throughout the novel, traversing the realms of myth, history, and collective consciousness: “Be ownkind. Be kithkinish. Be bloodysibby. Be irish. Be inish. Be offalia. Be hamlet. Be the property plot. Be Yorick and Lankystare. Be cool. Be mackinamucks of yourselves” (Joyce 465). HCE pertains to the age of gods *via* his identity as Adam, which, in turn, enables Joyce’s exploration of themes such as Christianity, creation, the original sin, and the Fall. The Irish intertext ensures other explorations of the age of heroes and the age of men *via* the doubled image of “Finn” in the person of HCE. Fionn mac Cumhail/Finn MacCool and hod-carrier Tim Finnegan, two other aspects of HCE, are notable exponents of Irish culture at large. Finn MacCool embodies the archetype of the legendary hero, symbolizing the heroic and divine aspects of humanity. An Irish demigod, a symbol of wisdom and knowledge (in relation to the “thumb of knowledge” myth), Finn MacCool exemplifies the heroic age. According to legend, like King Arthur, Finn MacCool is not dead, but sleeping, awaiting Ireland to call for his help. Within the text, the legendary demigod is alluded to several times, with his death being mourned by wailing women at another wake: “Macool, Macool, orra whyi deed ye diie?” (Joyce 6). Also, as mentioned on the first page of the *Wake*, the “dead giant manalive” is interred underneath Dublin, his head protruding from Howth hill, his feet stretching towards Phoenix Park: “erse solid man, that the humptyhillhead of humself promptly sends an unquiring one well to the west in quest of his tumptytumtoes; and their uptumpikepointandplace is at the knock out in the park” (Joyce 500, 3). Therefore, Fionn becomes a symbolic figure encapsulating both the ancient myths and the geographical landscape of Ireland. The dream-like language used to describe Fionn not only aligns with Vico’s hieroglyphic language category but also serves as a conduit for Joyce’s exploration of Irish cultural heritage. The other Finn, namely Tim Finnegan is an alcoholic hod-carrier who lacks both spiritual and divine qualities; as a representative of the flawed and

imperfect human nature, Tim Finnegan enables the fall and subsequent resurrection of humanity in the text of *Finnegans Wake*. According to the Irish American “Ballad of Finnegan’s Wake,” hod-carrier Finnegan, known for indulging in alcohol, drunkenly falls from a ladder (“Which was meant in a shirt of two shifts macoghamade or up Finn, threehatted ladder?”) and is presumed dead (Joyce 89). However, at his wake, his mourners start quarrelling and, in their quarrel, accidentally spill whiskey on his coffin, thereby resurrecting him. This act of resurrection, normally reserved for gods and mythic heroes, is enacted upon Tim Finnegan as a sort of parody, or in irony towards myth and divine force. Joyce’s binary exploration of two fundamentally different intertexts, one pertaining to Irish mythology and an era of heroic feats, and a lowbrow form of literature, namely a vaudeville song, ensure a thematic layering of Viconian eras. Concurrently, it is not only HCE who is endowed with various aspects of himself but his wife as well. ALP, is, at all at once, the river Liffey, womanhood at large and the “Bringer of Plurabilities (Joyce 104). *Via* her association with a Dublin-fixed spatial element, i.e., the river Liffey, Anna Livia represents the Irish people and culture at large. She embodies the collective voice of Dublin, flowing through the “cyclewheeling history,” and different perspectives, merging and witnessing the ages of gods, heroes, and humans (Joyce 186).

Another element, indicative of Vico’s concept of historical recurrence, is the interexchange that takes place between the Archdruid and Saint Patrick (pages 611-613). The arrival of Saint Patrick in Ireland, a cultural and religious figure of the Irish people, is perverted by Joyce in a cultural confrontation that intersects with Vico’s theories on myth and historical cycles, allowing an exploration of two overlapping ages of heroes. Both archdruid Balkelly “of islish chinchinjoss in his heptachromatic sevenhued septicoloured roranyellgreenlindigan mantle” and Saint Patrick, “the petty padre,” represent contrasting belief systems, symbolizing the clash between pre-Christian Celtic traditions and the arrival of Christianity in Ireland (Joyce 611-612). In the context of Vico’s theories, the Archdruid-Saint Patrick episode can be understood as

an exploration of the role of myth and poetic wisdom in early societies, whereby pre-Christian Ireland relied on mythological narratives and “wisdom of the ancients” (Vico 74); indicative of this is the role that the Archdruid, dubbed a “seer in seventh degree of wisdom,” has in this society. Involved in the production of knowledge and exerting control over the existing systems of thought, Archdruid Balkelly exemplifies an ironic shift in the balance of power, when considering Joyce’s Catholic Ireland. The meeting between the two, one an embodiment of mythological narratives and another, a historical and religious figure, raises questions about power dynamics and the clash between different systems of thought, relevant to their own age. At the same time, the Archdruid, in his quasi-historicalness, embodies once more the fragmented Irish identity and lost cultural heritage. The philosophical exchanges between the two, i.e. on vision and light, are an exploration of the difference between subsequent ages. The seer argues that the world is but an illusion, a “photoprismic velamina of hueful panepiphanal world spectacurum,” and provides the concept of light as an example, highlighting that only he, as a seer, can see all the colours light contains, while ordinary people cannot (Joyce 611). Saint Patrick retorts and explains that “tripeness to call thing and to call if say is good while, you pore shiroskuro blackinwhitepaddynger, by thiswis aposterioprismically apatstrophied and paralogically periparo-lysed, celestial from principalest of Iro’s Irisman’s ruinboon pot before,” namely that knowledge attained through sensory experience alone cannot lead to a complete understanding of the divine (Joyce 612).

In conclusion, the intertextual system present in *Finnegans Wake* is enabled by the text’s engagement with Vico’s *The New Science*. The deliberate rewritings within the novel exemplify the dynamism of intertextual systems, akin to a translation that effortlessly integrates foreign elements. Joyce, a *poeta doctus* in his own right, engages in a meticulous process of obscuring and unveiling meanings through deliberate rewritings, adaptations, and intertextual framings. Joyce’s pursuit of a concerted philosophical thought with that of *The New Science* was conducive to a highly

allusive language, which enables intertextuality and linguistic experiments. To that end, Joyce's adapting of *The New Science's* structure to *Finnegans Wake*, the linguistic ideas he mimics and builds upon, as well as the focus on the mythical aspect of the text, provide for a carefully curated intertext. At the same time, Joyce's skillful adaptation interweaves Irish society and history into a highly original reworking of Vico's *The New Science*. The fragmented identities of HCE and ALP enabled Joyce's exploration of two representative Irish intertexts, one an Irish myth, and an Irish song, as well as the overlapping of two systems of thought pertaining to two different ages of heroes, each serving a different god.

Notes:

¹ Hereafter also referred to as the *Wake*.

² At the ICLA Congress in Hong Kong in August 2004.

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