Knowledge of Things Human and Divine
True wisdom, then, should teach the knowledge of divine things in order to conduct human things to the highest good.
— *New Science*

a wise and letters play of all you can ceive
— *Finnegans Wake*
DONALD PHILLIP VERENE

Knowledge of Things
Human and Divine

VICO’S NEW SCIENCE AND
FINNEGANS WAKE

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Preface

from Atlanta to Oconee
—FW 140.35

This book takes the reader through the career and works of Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) from a new viewpoint. Two major figures introduced Vico to the twentieth century—Benedetto Croce and James Joyce. From the mid-twentieth century on there was a growing desire to free Vico from the philosophical idealism of Croce, who in the early part of the century had presented Vico as the Italian Hegel. In the English-speaking world a great step was taken in this new direction by Isaiah Berlin in lectures he gave to the Italian Institute in London in 1957 and 1958, in which he focused attention on Vico’s unique conceptions of knowledge and imagination. In Italian thought, the similar concern to conceive of “Vico without Hegel” was led by Pietro Piovani in Vico’s city of Naples. The challenge was not to Croce’s erudition in Vico’s texts but to the Crocean merging of Vico’s voice with another, not allowing Vico to speak for himself.

The large international literature that developed from a wide range of scholars during the last half of the twentieth century has shown Vico to be an original thinker whose voice has echoes in all the contemporary fields of the humanities and social thought. This literature oscillates between two approaches:
understanding Vico as a figure in intellectual history, examining his sources
and influences, and understanding him in philosophical terms, critically assess-
ing Vico’s ideas themselves.

There is a third Vico that neither of these two approaches captures. This is
the Vico discovered by James Joyce and made the central figure of his great
work *Finnegans Wake* (*FW*). Joyce reminds us that Vico is a human actuality,
a certain spirit to be awakened and brought to life. Through this Vico we are
able to see and hear the workings of the human world in a very lively way.
Joyce points us toward a unique Vico, a thinker of the first magnitude from
whom we can no more steal a line than we can steal the club of Hercules.

From this perspective, Vico is more than just another figure in the history of
ideas and more than just another author of a philosophical system. Joyceans,
with some exceptions, have given only limited attention to Vico and the Vich-
ianisms in Joyce, usually reporting that Joyce derives his cycles from Vico’s.
Vichians, with some exceptions, know little about Joyce beyond the fact that
he was one of a number of figures influenced by Vico.

I first read *Finnegans Wake* in 1979 while writing *Vico’s Science of Imagina-
tion* in Florence, where I borrowed a copy from the British Institute Library.
After *pranzo*, the full midday meal, I read a few pages of Joyce’s book of the
dark before “feeling aslip” in my *pisolino*, my little nap, entering into my
daytime “nightmaze,” to awake from it to the long Italian afternoon. I had no
special interest in this experiment beyond a way of reading, in the afternoon,
the most unusual book of the twentieth century while, in the morning, writing
about the most unusual book of the eighteenth century. I was aware that Vico
was a source for Joyce, but I had no grasp of the extent of the connection.

Over the past two decades circumstances have forced Joyce on me as a way
to approach Vico. One of these circumstances has been my attempt to con-
front the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry, to comprehend phi-
losophy as a kind of literature. Philosophy is, after all, an activity of lan-
guage. From Joyce’s litter comes letter and from letter comes literature. From
*phaos*, light, comes *phantasia*, imagination, and, in Vico’s terms, from *phan-
tasia* comes *philosophia*. Neither philosophy nor literature is possible without
imagination. Philosophy must go to school with the poets to discover its own
beginnings in the myths from which culture itself begins. Philosophy and
literature respond to these myths in their own ways and form their own identi-

ties as contraries within the wider history of culture.

Another circumstance that led me to Joyce was my association with the
Joyce scholar Richard Ellmann, who spent the last few years of his career at
Emory. We had a number of luncheon conversations that revolved mostly
around Plato’s quarrel with the poets and around Vico and Joyce. I recall well
my first lunch with Ellmann, at a place near campus. He astonished me when
he ordered a bowl of chili topped with raw onions and, to drink with it, a glass of scotch “with lots of ice.” It reminded me of Bloom’s gorgonzola sandwich at Davy Byrne’s Moral pub in *Ulysses*, on which I had heard Ellmann remark in a lecture given years before. He claimed, if I remember correctly, that Joyce has Bloom make the unusual choice of gorgonzola because it is a kind of cheese that is alive.

My connection with Ellmann led me to consider finding a way to bring together Joyceans and Vichians from various countries to raise the question of the combination of Joyce and Vico. This became a reality when I discovered the interest in Joyce as well as in Vico of Vittore Branca, then director of the Giorgio Cini Foundation, located in the former cloister of the Palladian church on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, opposite the Piazzetta San Marco in Venice — a setting familiar throughout the world because of its depiction on Venetian postcards.

The week-long gathering began there on Bloomsday (June the 16th) in 1985. Sixteen of the papers delivered by Joyceans and Vichians appeared on Bloomsday two years later, in a volume dedicated to Max Harold Fisch, co-translator of Vico’s *New Science* into English, and to the memory of Richard Ellmann, who had died shortly before it appeared. *Vico and Joyce* remains the only book in print that critically confronts the two thinkers head-on. Many of the other one hundred or so papers that were presented have appeared, to the good of the subject, in various journals. The connection between Joyce and Vico became for me a sleeping giant, only partially awake, like Howth Castle and Environs at the beginning of *Finnegans Wake*.

Another circumstance has been the *Finnegans Wake* reading group that has met for an hour each month, for more than a decade, in the Institute for Vico Studies at Emory, each time to read aloud and discuss one page of the *Wake*, casually chosen and circulated in advance. I have entered each session wondering what, if anything, might be said of the page in question, and each time, without fail, I have left with a new vision of its contents.

Like all Joyce’s works, *Finnegans Wake* is set in Dublin. Ellmann reports that Joyce asked an American visitor, Julien Levy, to investigate whether there were any Dublins in the United States. Levy found there were three (I find there are today at least ten). Joyce was anxious to know if any lie on a river, as Dublin does on the Liffey. There was one, according to Levy — Dublin, Georgia. It lies on the Oconee River — the old world in the new. Dublin, Laurens County, Georgia, appears on the first page of *Finnegans Wake* “by the stream Oconee” (Gaelic, *ochón*, “alas”).

In a letter to his benefactor Harriet Shaw Weaver in 1926, in which he enclosed a key to the lines of a draft of the first page of his *Work in Progress* that was to become *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce claims the town’s motto is “Dou-
bling all the time.” On the first page of *Finnegans Wake* Joyce writes: “Laurens County’s gorgios . . . went doublin their mumper all the time.” I write this in Atlanta, Georgia, 132 miles from Dublin. I am happy to report that the gorgios of Dublin have doubled their mumper, their n(m)umb(p)er, as there now stands, next to Dublin, on the other side of the Oconee, an East Dublin.

Joyce’s significance for comprehending Vico has forced itself on me by such circumstances, yet this book is not about Joyce but about Vico, with Joyce’s words and insights as a guide. Although I am by profession an interpreter of Vico, I remain a Joyce amateur. I am only a reader of Joyce. In the circumstances of my own life I do not share with Joyce the fear of thunderstorms or dogs, nor did I, like Vico, fall on my head in childhood. Who can say what these lacks in the circumstances of my life may have prevented me from realizing.

Joyce is the one figure who has introduced Vico to the twentieth century without attachment to any doctrine but his own. His intent was not to interpret Vico but to use Vico’s theories, as he said, “for all they are worth.” In so doing Joyce has presented Vico in a way that has never before been done. Of those who read Joyce, all read *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, many read *Ulysses*, but almost no one reads *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce believed *Finnegans Wake* to be the greatest work of literature of the twentieth century, a work on the level of Dante and Homer that tells the story of the human race as written in the human soul.

I believe the work that follows has two principal precursors in English writing on Vico: Robert Flint’s *Vico*, which was published as a volume in Blackwood’s Philosophical Classics for English Readers in 1884, and H. P. Adams’s *Life and Writings of Giambattista Vico*, which appeared in 1935. These are the only studies of Vico in English whose aim is to review all of Vico’s works in relation to his career. Flint’s is the first book on Vico in English, and Adams’s stands alone in the twentieth century as a work in English on all aspects of Vico. Joyce was interested to obtain a copy of Adams’s work, when it appeared, and Flint’s book is mentioned in *Finnegans Wake*, “a chip off the old Flint.”

In 1973, Norman O. Brown published a small volume, *Closing Time*, the text of which is a series of juxtaposed quotations from the works of Vico and Joyce—“two books get on top of each other.” In 1971, at a panel on Vico and Joyce at the Third International James Joyce Symposium in Trieste, the late Giorgio Tagliacozzo, founder of the Institute for Vico Studies, spoke of Joyce’s “animus naturaliter vichianus.” He argued that “Joyce was the sole intuitive forerunner of the speculative reinterpretation” of Vico’s thought. He claimed that Joyce, because of his background and natural inclination, saw in Vico’s work a form of thought, shared with *Finnegans Wake*, that embodied “all of
the main aspects of humanity in general, and of each individual, in his past, present, and future.”

The more recent work on Vico in English, most of it excellent, is specialist. It has focused largely on the *New Science* and on specific themes, such as Vico as an anti-Enlightenment figure, as an embodiment of the Italian humanist tradition, and as having a unique theory of knowledge and history. Flint’s and Adams’s works are general studies, offering solid academic approaches to Vico, but they do not go inside Vico and attempt to discover the inner form of his thought. An academic approach keeps Vico where he is and does not risk making him come alive again. In writing this work I have tried to combine Vico’s method of meditation and narration with Joyce’s method, as Joyce described it to Jacques Mercanton (*Les heures de James Joyce*): “Chance furnishes me what I need. I’m like a man who stumbles: my foot strikes something, I look down, and there is exactly what I’m in need of.” If Vico is part of the litter of Joyce’s great “Dirtdump” of history, he is everywhere in it. If Vico is resurrected as “Earwicker” in *Finnegans Wake*, as I think he is, can Vico also be philosophically resurrected, by putting back together the pieces in which he now lies in the diverse approaches comprising the current interest in his thought?

Paul Hazard wrote, at the beginning of *La pensée européenne au XVIIIe siècle*: “If only Italy had lent an ear to Giambattista Vico, and if, as at the time of the Renaissance, she had served as guide to Europe, would not our intellectual destiny have been different? Our eighteenth-century ancestors would not have believed that all that was clear was true; but on the contrary that ‘clarity is the vice of human reason rather than its virtue,’ because a clear idea is a finished idea. They would not have believed that reason was our first faculty, but on the contrary that imagination was.” Might we now lend an ear to Vico and hear what he heard in history. Might we now “Hearhere!” and “here-hear,” with Vico, the thunder of Jove that reverberates in Joyce’s hundred-letter thunderwords, while at the same time producing a reliable view of the whole of Vico’s work. This means that much in the ensuing chapters must be straight discussions of Vico’s works, but I have tried to punctuate these discussions with some of Joyce’s insights, to invite the reader to keep a lively perspective. It is a tall order, and I doubt I have fully succeeded. I wish at least to offer the reader a book that is a pleasure to read, so that Joyce’s advice might prevail, “Enjombyourselves thurily!”

This book is double-jointed. It may be read in two ways. The reader, perhaps not very familiar with Vico, may wish to concentrate on the career of Vico’s thought as it develops through the phases of his major works, and to pass lightly over many of the passages from *Finnegans Wake*. The reader more
familiar with Vico’s work may wish to look closely at these passages, to see how Vico entered Joyce’s words and how they offer a lively glimpse of Vico, apart from the standard interpretations.

Although the aim of Vico’s thought is the humanist ideal of wisdom speaking, Vico has never been easily understood. In a letter to the lawyer Francesco Saverio Estevan, Vico said his New Science was so poorly received by the intellectuals of Naples because it “turned upside down everything they erroneously remembered and had imagined about the principles of all divine and human erudition.” Ezra Pound wrote to Joyce on November 15, 1926, after Joyce had sent him the Shaun chapters of Finnegans Wake: “Nothing so far as I make out, nothing short of divine vision or a new cure for the clapp can possibly be worth all the circumambient peripherization.”

As Ellmann has influenced my grasp of Joyce, it was Ernesto Grassi, the late European philosopher and humanist, who most influenced my grasp of Vico. My conversations with Grassi over almost two decades, in Zürich and at his villa on Ischia off the Bay of Naples, allowed me to develop the implications of my interest in Vico’s “poetic wisdom” and the “imaginative universal.” Our discussions led to what became my book on Vico’s autobiography, The New Art of Autobiography (1991), especially the thesis that Vico used his own principles of poetry to make a fable of himself.

The idea for the present book came from Charles Grench, then executive editor of Yale University Press, who, when we discussed the completion of my Philosophy and the Return to Self-Knowledge (1997), suggested I go on to write a comprehensive book on Vico, putting together his life and thought. I also wish to thank Otto Bohlmann for his kind attention to the manuscript.

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I thank Andrea Battistini for his kind permission to translate the chronology from his edition of Vico’s Opere that appears at the end of this book, with some minor modifications and additions.

Once again I thank my at-home editor and mistress of the Institute for Vico Studies, Molly Black Verene, for her advice and insights, among other things.
Abbreviations

Giambattista Vico


Citations to FNS and NS are to the paragraph enumeration introduced in the Laterza edition and common to most Italian editions, for example, Vico’s Opere, 2 vols., ed. Andrea Battistini (Milan: Mondadori, 1990). Translations of Vico’s works are occasionally modified in relation to the originals.

James Joyce

Abbreviations


Citations to FW are to both page and line. Where it is evident that the citation refers to FW, only page and line numbers appear.
A Portrait of Vico
The Joycean Vico: 
A New Key

Here are notes. There’s the key.
One two three.
—FW 236.11–12

The Descent into History

In the sixth book of the Aeneid, Virgil describes the descent of Aeneas into the Underworld. Aeneas has left the coasts of Troy and, after suffering the tribulations and wanderings caused by the wrath of Juno, he arrives at the Greek settlement of Cumae on the western coast of Italy, just north of the Bay of Naples. On one of the two summits at Cumae is the temple of Apollo, built by Daedalus in gratitude for his safe flight from his imprisonment on Crete by King Minos.

With his ships at anchor and his men ashore, Aeneas seeks out the cavern of the Sibyl, which could be approached through a passageway of the temple. He wishes to learn from the Sibyl, who is possessed by Apollo, where to find the entrance to the Underworld. He hopes to encounter the shade of his father, Anchises, former prince of Troy. Aeneas learns that the gate to the Underworld is not far but is surrounded by a deep wood. The Sibyl tells him that in order to pass beneath the earth he must secure a golden bough growing high in one of
the trees. The bough is to be brought to the queen of Pluto, god of the Underworld. The Sibyl says the bough can be plucked with ease if Fate is calling Aeneas to make this descent; if not, no amount of force can break the bough.

In despair of finding the single tree in the endless wood, Aeneas prays for guidance. A pair of doves, his mother’s birds, appear and lead him to the golden bough, which he plucks easily. He returns with it to the Sibyl, and she accompanies him as they cross the threshold into Pluto’s realm. Progressing through the scenes of the souls caught in Hades, including meeting his lost comrades and a sad encounter with Dido, who, on his departure from Carthage, committed suicide over her love for Aeneas, they arrive at the end of this fearful region. There Aeneas places the offering of the bough. They enter a land of joy and green fields. Here they encounter Anchises surveying the souls that are to pass into the light above. In this intermediate state, Anchises says, each suffers in accordance with the nature of his own spirit, the *genius* that accompanies a person throughout life and into the other world. Some good and magnificent souls, Anchises says, go on into the Elysian Fields, and with the turning of the great wheel of time, are reborn into the world of the living.

Anchises shows Aeneas his future — how he will marry his Italian wife Lavinia and how from this union the Trojans will produce the race that will populate Latium and Italy. He shows him the figure in Elysium who will be his last-born and will rule Alba Longa and how from this noble line will come Romulus, who will found Rome. Having inspired Aeneas with the love of fame, Anchises tells him of the wars he must wage in order to achieve it. Then he passes the Sibyl and Aeneas through the gate, back to the upper world. Aeneas rejoins his ships, the cycle of his life before him. With the Sibyl’s guidance he has recapitulated his past and in the present learned his future.

In the first canto of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante begins the description of his entrance into Inferno. Midway in the journey of his life, Dante finds himself in a dark wood. Unlike Aeneas, he has not entered this wood purposefully but has strayed into it, as if in a dream. Symbolically this dark wood is the error of our lives, and Dante must strive to find in it the true way of Christian salvation. In the darkness he comes upon a hill illuminated by divine light, but as he attempts to ascend toward the light he is overcome by fear. His way is blocked, first by a leopard, then by a lion, and finally and decisively by a she-wolf. Symbolically the three beasts foreshadow the regions of the Inferno, in reverse order. The she-wolf (*lupa*) represents the sins of the flesh and the appetites; the lion (*leone*) the sins of violence and ambition; and the leopard (*lonza*) the sins of malice and fraud, the worst sins that corrupt the spirit and destroy friendship and social order.
With his way finally blocked by the ferocity of the she-wolf, Dante can only
glimpse the light of the delectable mountain (*il dilettoso monte*). In his despair
there appears to him the shade of Virgil. Dante recognizes him as the author of
the *Aeneid*, whom he calls his master in poetic style. Virgil offers to be his
guide and suggests that Dante may avoid the beasts and achieve entrance to St.
Peter’s gate by an arduous and indirect route passing through the regions of
Inferno and Purgatorio. Unlike Aeneas, who deliberately seeks out the Sibyl,
Dante acquires Virgil’s guidance unexpectedly. Dante doubts whether, as a
living man, he should attempt to enter such regions. He asks Virgil why he has
come. Virgil explains that he has not arrived by chance but comes at the
request of Beatrice who, because of her divine love, wishes Dante to be set on
the true path.

Virgil is a virtuous pagan; having been born before Christ, he cannot enter
heaven. He warns Dante that he cannot escort him for the full journey. At the
end of Purgatorio Virgil slips away, giving Dante into the hands of Beatrice to
proceed to Paradiso. As he completes his progress through Paradiso, Dante
has before him not the specific events of the second half of his life’s journey but
a total wisdom of things human and divine. He has grasped the beginning and
the end of all things. In the last canto of the *Divine Comedy* he says that what
he has grasped will defy the powers of language to express. Compared to what
he can remember of his journey, his words, he says, will fall even more short of
capturing it than would those of an infant, who can utter only expressive
sounds.

In the first chapter of *Finnegans Wake* Joyce describes the fall of the primor-
dial giant Finnegan and his awakening as the modern family man and pub
owner, H. C. E., to be known as H. C. Earwicker and by other variations on
his name, such as Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, Haroun Childeric Egge-
bert, Haveth Childers Everywhere, and Here Comes Everybody. *Finnegans
Wake* is Joyce’s descent into the underworld of history. It is his book of the
dark, his “experiment in interpreting ‘the dark night of the soul’ ” (*SL* 327).
Finnegan’s fall is the fall of humanity into history, with its constant repetitions,
its courses and recourses of events, and their meanings, which can be ex-
pressed only in double truths. Finnegan’s descent is an abrupt fall, without any
clear purpose: an act of chance, an accident. He wakes to find himself, who-
ever he is, in the dream of history. As Stephen in *Ulysses* says, “History is a
nightmare from which I am trying to awake” (*U* 28.377).

For his guide, Virgil’s Aeneas sought out the Sibyl, at a place just north
of Naples, and he ended his voyage at Lavinium. For his guide, Dante takes
Virgil himself, who, on a voyage while finishing the *Aeneid*, contracted a